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THE MARK

AQUILA KEMPSTER

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"And then it seemed as if all time swept back, . . . Once again he was the Raj-bhat Prince, and this—this was his heart's desire!"

(*See page 323*)

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THE MARK

By

AQUILA KEMPSTER

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CHAPTER I

IT was common talk in the bazaars when Yah Mahommed came to town; the Mussulman grew a little more truculent, and the patient Hindu a trifle more obsequious. A thousand men at a thousand city gates would bow themselves to the very ground when the great old Moslem passed out or in. Probably one man in the thousand knew why he bowed so low, but Mahommed's keen gray eyes ever sought out the one. Perchance a glance flashed and was lost ere the rest had time to see, and then—well, strange things happen unaccountably in this hoary land, things seeming to the uninitiated without cause or sequence, such as the sudden rising of some mad Mullah, who, without rhyme or reason, runs amuck in his little mud fort and keeps the border all astir; or the Kyberie police grow restive, and close the pass to Afghan and Hindu alike, till recalled to their senses by the sight of a mountain battery and a few score little brown Goorkhas creeping over the *ghauts* below.

But these, and such things—what were they to Yah Mahommed?

All the way from Cabul to Bombay, there was hardly a better known name or a less known man.

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The magic in his mere name had been recognised so long and bandied back and forth so much that it was quite impossible to separate the true from the false. One day he was heard of over on the northwest frontier leading some wild tribesman's rush, or at least inspiring it; yet the very next morning he would be seen in the Bombay horse-market, peacefully haggling over his Baluchi mares with Jorabjee Hortibhoy, the Parsee banker. There was never a rising, from the Great Mutiny down to a factional holiday fight in the slums, that did not claim him for its sponsor. Some even whispered of the Nana of Bithdur—— But pshaw! we all know he died like a dog in the Terai, official documents notwithstanding. There were others who swore he was the great Aurunzemund himself, back in the flesh, while north and south and east and west men lied and claimed to be akin to him; fakirs and beggars alike treasured the coin he had carelessly flung in the dust—treasured it though their knees were trembling and their eyes dim for lack of the little rice the coin would have bought.

Such, according to the gossip of the bazaars, was Yah Mahommed. And he? Well, he smiled in his long white beard, and held his peace.

As a matter of fact, the real Mahommed was as far beyond the ken of the wonder-mongers of the Chandi Chauk and the Bendi Bazaar as is possible to imagine. A scattered few—priests, fakirs and

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the like—perhaps knew the manner of man he truly was, and these few naturally followed the man's own lead, and held their peace.

Now, there was a woman in Bombay—a woman of the bazaars—whose fame in a lesser manner had also spread to the Chandi Chauk and beyond, by reason of her gift of divination and her ability to cast spells. There are, or were, many native sorceresses in the town, of more or less disrepute; but Loda was unique. First, she was neither old nor ugly; secondly, she wasn't disreputable; and, thirdly, she saw through men and things as though the veil which ordinarily hides their real inwardnesses had been of clear glass. And she moved them, too, even as she listed; so that she stood first and alone of her kind, even before the whisper grew that Yah Mahommed had set the seal of his approval on her. After that, men bent to touch the hem of her robe as she passed them in the cool of the evening, and would possibly have annoyed her with their abject devotion but for the grim watch-dog, Ben Israel Ben Alif, the huge misshapen dwarf, a very Son of Sheitan, who followed always at the lady's heels, and made no bones of hustling the faithful and accursed alike into the gutter if they drew too near the "Chand ki Beti" [Daughter of the Moon]. And they had so often witnessed his prowess that they rarely attempted reprisals, or

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did aught but snarl out ugly words in their beards as they rolled in the dust.

So Loda went her way back and forth as she would, and her eyes were cool and her pulses quiet, for all the adulation. Perhaps she knew too much of men to be easily affected; so many came with tangled lives in their hands for her long, pliant fingers to unravel. Lordly Rajputs waited on her gifts, and old, decrepit fakirs with barely a rag that would hold them in decency. Borahs, Parsees, Hindus, Moguls, aye, and wild men from the hills, brought their tangles. And some she touched with Sleep, and some with Laughter, and again some with Fear; and whom she chose to draw she drew, and whom she chose to bind she bound. But of her own life, her own fate, she was all unconscious. When she tried to delve for herself she was hedged on the hither side and the far by cloudy dreams, elusive and baffling, as seems indeed the case with all seers who serve the world with truth faithfully, but who, when they would press it to their personal service, are mocked by vain illusions.

. . . . . .

In the suburbs of Bombay, well on toward Dadur, there's a little bungalow in a very big compound, and the place is still known as Mahommed's Rest. It is well named, with its cool wide verandas shaded by dates and palms, and shut in from the outer world by deep thickets where the bulbul sings.

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The grounds are almost large enough to be a small-sized park, and the house small enough to be nearly lost in it. Besides this, the whole place is surrounded by a high wall, an ornamental iron gate giving entrance when the owner so desired, and effectually preventing it when he did not. Both the gate and the wall were certainly necessary for the least semblance of privacy, for in the shadow of the wall on the outside, continually, day and night, sat and lay and crouched a motley crew of beggars, fakirs, wandering priests and the like; some, big sturdy animals whose faces gave the lie direct to their peaceful avocations; others, grovelling monstrosities more apt to inspire disgust than pity; palsied cripples, blind and lame; pariah dogs mixing surlily with pariah men; whining prayers twisting in with nasty obscene curses; and, now and anon, a fight, in which men and dogs were tangled up in a savage tussle and all but lost in the cloud of dust they raised, and from which first one and then another would emerge limping and cursing or weeping as the case might be, and tying up their rags and bruises, while the dog implicated usually sat afar off and licked his wounds sulkily till a chance offered for another fray.

These were the pensioners of Mahommed's bounty. Once a day Abdallah, the *khansamah*, opened the iron gate and, followed by two servants, gave out rice and *ghee* and great cakes of unleavened bread.

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He stood with a bamboo pole tipped with an iron hook, which, together with a fluent tongue, he used freely while supervising the fair distribution of his master's bounty. While Mahommed dwelt within these never left the spot, merely shifting a little into or out of the sun as their inclination led, for sometimes the master himself came forth and then they fairly rolled in the dust at his feet, and while he cursed them heartily in return for their fulsome laudations, he always ended by scattering a few annas or pice for them to fight over; and while they were snarling, biting and tearing, in their scuffle for the coins, he would ride away on his business.

One early April day he sat out in the garden under the rustling shade of the date trees, and near him in a low wicker chair a woman was reclining—Loda. She was slight of figure and young of face—a child but for the deep, somber eyes that drew one curiously toward speculation on what lay behind their velvet depths. Many men, it was said, free and strong, had gazed their fill into those eyes, only to find, when just within touch of what they sought, that they had lost themselves; and all they could ever recall of their wanderings were vague, troubled dreams and a memory of the softness and dark splendour of the eyes that had shorn them of some of their freedom and much of their strength; for no living man had ever come back from the dreams this child-woman sent, quite his own man. This

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was doubtless why the dwarf, Ben Alif, a wild savage from the hills, the strongest man and fiercest of his clan—the "Wolf of the Brahnis"—had turned sheep-dog even in his heyday, and learned the tricks My Lady of the Slumbrous Eyes chose to teach him.

Even Mahommed, the Old, the Wise, the Master of Men, felt something of the magic as he sat gazing at her; but he had antidotes: age, knowledge and the power of it, and guile—aye, the guile of Sheitan himself.

And the girl, knowing him to be the only man she could not dominate, honoured him above all other men, followed his guidance continually, and drank in eagerly much of the wisdom and perhaps some of the guile that made her protector what he was. She might easily have followed him as wife, or slave, for her heart was strangely calm; but this he had never seemed to seek, at least as yet, but had waited and watched the stars.

He had lain with the beasts of the desert long nights, ever watching and tracing out in the heavens the ways of Fate. He had read the rise and fall of kings and peoples in the starry hieroglyphics; had seen the pregnant planets, forming patterns heavy with fate, reach a perihelion where, if a man had force enough and wisdom to direct it, he might seize his destiny with both his hands and swing far out and up to the summit of his desires. He had

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watched these chances come and go; seen the moment of power, and calmly let it swing by to the weakest aphelion, trying his own strength and patience against a time when a stronger pattern should form which would justify the greatness of his desires. And lo! at last the combination was forming, slowly but surely, as though his will had had the drawing of it, and he determined to throw in his lot with the stars now—to seize his fate strongly and prove the wisdom of his previous waiting. All this, and more, he had said; and now Loda, the girl, sat brooding over his words.

She herself had vaguely felt a crisis coming and, strangely enough, she drew back from it half fearfully; and she begged the old man to wait again till an even more favourable transit should occur.

But he shook his head and his eyes grew fierce as an eagle's. "Thou knowest not what thou dost counsel, child; I have waited for this—aye, waited it seems a thousand years. I have lived and worked and passed behind the veil, and come again, and ever come just too late, or much too early, for my heart's desire. Thou hast come and gone like a shadow ever just beyond my reach. I have watched thy going out and coming in, and have willed thee more beautiful and made thee more wise, life by life, till to-day thou art a pearl of great price, knowing good and evil; and now, if thou wilt be strong and follow me, we

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will eat together of the tree of life—and never part again."

She sat for some moments with her chin in her hand, as though carved in marble, with brows drawn straight and hard, and eyes that stared unseeingly, while slowly the warm blood drew back and left her cheeks all whiteness. And the old man, knowing her well, held his peace and waited on her vision.

At last she shivered and then threw up a round white arm, as though to ward off some evil, and cried out:

"There is danger, my lord!"

She left her chair and knelt by his side appealingly. "Let it go, my lord; let it go! See, take me as I am. I will follow thee, and serve thee as I may. I do not understand the heart's desire, but am I not enough?"

He held her to him, but her appeal and her beauty were as nothing—his brain was quick with her warning.

"What is it, child—the shadow?"

"Yes, my lord; but it is a radiant shadow."

"Didst thou recognise it?"

"Yes. It was he."

"Ah—h! It was a long-drawn sigh of relief; and he drew the girl up and kissed her forehead, and then threw back his head with an imperious gesture she knew so well, as he cried:

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"Verily, the gates of paradise fling wide when Yah Mahommed winds the horn. I tell thee, Loda, the danger makes the victory sure. Look back, beyond the veil as I have told thee, and thou wilt see this shadow, this man, ever threatening us, both thee and me. Ah! there was a time when he was great and we were small; he a prince, and thou and I, Loda mine, naked slaves. Dost remember how he knelt to thee one evening among the shady tamarisks and—whisper, Loda—how I sent him down to hell?

"And ever since, in all thy lives, he has sought thee out and lost himself in thee. It's his fate to serve thee; thou hast set thy foot firmly on his neck, and thou shalt take from him all he has to give, poor fool—even his power of loving. And I—dost thou not see, child—I am old; this body is nearly spent. None can remember when I came, or how, but many look to see me go. Curse them, the fools! Why, the very walls of hell would rock and fall if Yah Mahommed went that way! But I—no, I will not go! I will stay with thee, beloved; and this man, this shadow thing, shall serve the way. Thou shalt call him, Loda. He is even now close to thee. I have seen him in my dreams, and thou and he and I are irrevocably bound by the past to work together in the future; but it is for the strong to say who as lord and who as slave.

"Now, listen. Seek him out, and bring him to

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thy side. Weave wisely and with much care, till thou hast bound him fast; and remember, as thou bindest, fast or loose, so the issue will be, not only for thee and me, but also—— Nay, but there! Thou hast never failed me yet, and thou knowest thy work better than I can teach it; only remember how long I have waited and watched, aye, and sought out the beginning of things and taught my spirit to seek even the end, else hadst thou been lost to me utterly; but now, if thou art strong, I can win thee."

"Thou meanest——"

"Dost thou remember Elhiem the Egyptian—how I took his body whilst thou didst keep his spirit wandering in the mist of dreams? I did not tell thee, but even then I was planning this. I could have kept his body the full allotted time had I so willed it. Loda, I tell thee, girl, I will never die again. And neither shalt thou! Thou shalt send this coming shadow dreaming in thy service, and I will take his part and place, and I shall be free and young, and I will teach thee the heart's desire. We are wise, and by and by will grow closer and ever closer, till, when thy spirit grows weary of its prison, verily thou shalt come to me, and we twain will be one Elohim."

"And the other one——?"

"The other—the other!" he exclaimed, with an impatient frown. "Why hark back to him? We

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have sent him out before, not once or twice, but many times. Now, we will use him for a while before we let him go. Surely thou art not afraid?"

"No, I am not afraid, my lord; and I will obey thy counsel," she answered quietly, but she shivered as she spoke.

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CHAPTER II

PROBABLY the coolest and certainly the wettest spot in Bombay on any hot afternoon is the tumbledown old bath-house attached to the staff quarters of the Byculla College Hospital. Big banana palms tower round and over its dark verandas, and there's a musical "drip, drip, drip" about the place that's simply maddening after a long session in the stuffy classrooms. Five minutes after "lectures," every tub has its occupant, while round and about the wet bricked floors dance the less fortunate in the race for a place, some in clinging pajamas, most in Nature's buff—albeit the buff often merges into brown—and on them all the grinning *bheestees* play the hose and drive back with water and towels the swarming mosquitoes. These same mosquitoes are the dread guardians of this enchanted spot; they are born, and live, and die, by the million, under the cool dark bananas, and the shrill music of their choruses rises and falls unceasingly with the rhythmic strain of the dripping water.

A professor of hygiene, after visiting the bath-house, gave a "special" on it in his classroom, with the result that orders went forth for the cutting

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down of the banana palms and the replacing of the old melodious water-pipes with brand new zinc affairs that wouldn't drip. Various other changes of a like nature were to be made, but the proposed innovations raised such a howl of protest from the students that their right to entertain the shade and the drip and the mosquitoes was immediately ceded, and the mosquitoes showed their gratitude by thriving and multiplying and growing to a size and intelligence unsurpassed in any other spot in the Presidency.

Of course it was all very well to dash in with your following of *bheestees*, with flying towels and streams of water, but to sneak down there alone was a different matter. You generally managed to arrive at your tub and get the tap of your particular water-pipe turned on with nothing worse than a skirmish with the videttes; but when you wanted to get out you had to run the gauntlet of whole battalions of the pests, and it was no uncommon sight to see a naked figure flying wildly for the bungalow, followed and surrounded by a clamouring swarm of insects.

This was the favourite resort of Allan Meredith during the hot vacation afternoons. He was out from the home hospitals and doing "intern" duty as house surgeon for the sake of the experience. Meredith had found that even the usual sordid bazaar accident was not apt to occur between one

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and five o'clock in the afternoon—the native world for the most part lay behind the *purdah*, heavy with sleep—and the doctor was able to calculate on a good three hours of uninterrupted study.

He and Stubbs, the bulldog, had their choice of the whole range of tubs these days, and the Doctor had rigged up two of them with net cages to protect their heads, while his own boasted quite a table of crossed boards for the support of his books. Here the two, master and dog, sat day by day up to their necks in the cool water of their respective tubs; the one dozing fitfully, with his nose balanced on a board support; the other blowing tobacco smoke into the hot moist air and striving to follow the gray curling wraiths as they faded subtilely away. He could follow them far in their chemical changes till their attenuation became so great that the mind could reduce them no further; and then the man would come back to earth with a sigh at the futility of his deductions from effects while causes still evaded him.

Many things had been prophesied about this young doctor's future by his professors, and the work he had already done seemed to justify their opinions. He had taken up a line as his specialty which was probably the most delicate and evasive in the whole science of medicine; and while at first he had begun the study of the nerve system as a detail of other work, he had by degrees become

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so fascinated, and at the same time the field had so broadened before his advance, that he had begun to specialise before he was aware of it, and, from general neurosis, had devoted himself to the action of particular ganglia under abnormal conditions. Just how far his own temperament had decided the direction of his studies he probably could not himself have told, but he had long recognised that there were subliminal stretches—tracts where matter seemed to border on something he did not at present understand; places of dreams and faint whisperings, where both good and evil seemed to thrive, where the imagination had its root, and those many other subtle things that lift us up to heaven or drop us down to hell.

These things he felt, as all sensitive thinkers must, but his training at Munich and Bonn, previous to his English course in medicine, had given his mind a strong rationalistic tendency which had proved of immense value in his later analytical work—his brochure in answer to Wegnall's "Circulation of Spirit," for instance, being considered not only a complete refutation of that theory, but a logical demonstration of the supremacy of matter *per se*. His present attitude was one of confident determination to bridge over the debatable ground and prove that it was debatable only because sufficient knowledge of neurosis had not yet been developed.

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But during the past few weeks he had been much exercised by the condition of his own nervous system; several times there had been sudden and most curious lapses, almost of consciousness, certainly of that mental integrity on which he prided himself. He recognised that the trouble was probably due to his present close habits of study; still the symptoms were sufficiently peculiar to cause him considerable unquiet.

One afternoon he was brought back from his mental excursion by the quick "pat, pat, pat" of naked feet that came hurrying down the flagged outer passage; then a knock, and a voice, "Sahib *ander hai?*"

It was the hospital *hamal* who entered and received the boisterous attentions of Stubbs with dubious pleasure.

"*Ca hai*, Abdul?" asked the Doctor.

"Nicholas Sahib *hai*," answered the man.

"What does he want?"

"To consult with *hazoor*."

"Oh, pshaw! Shut up, Stubbs! Here, Abdul, open the door and let him out before those hungry devils drive him mad!"

The man obeyed; and Stubbs, who had become the unwilling centre of attraction as soon as he left his tub, darted away with his abbreviated tail tucked in and a swarm of mosquitoes in hot pursuit.

Now, it was Meredith's habit to take this bath

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in his pajamas, and on coming out to slip a bath-robe over them and do his towelling later in his rooms, instead of taking the chance of being eaten alive out in the bath-house. But with a caller waiting it was a different matter, so he prepared to take his rubbing where he was.

"Abdul Millik, hurry now! Take that towel and smite these Sons of Sheitan hip and thigh; and mark you, my friend, if one of them so much as lights on my great toe, I, Kubberwan, will have thee tortured with a whole week of night-watches. Now smite, Abdulla; smite!"

He slipped out of the tub, slim, brown and nude, and began rubbing vigorously while the *hamal* darted about him flourishing a towel wildly.

Had one been observant, he might have been surprised at the darkness of the Doctor's skin; he was not merely browned to the elbows and the root of the neck, but his whole body held that delicate bronze tone so rarely met with in the Anglo-Saxon. And the observer, had he been very quick, might have noticed at one time something peculiar in the manner of the *hamal;* he halted suddenly in his gyrations for possibly the fraction of a second, the arms that were swinging the towel suddenly stiffened rigidly, and a look of astonishment, almost terror, dilated his eyes. The next moment he had recovered and was bounding on the disordered ranks of the mosquitoes with renewed zeal.

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Now, what had caught the eye of Abdulla Millik, *hamal* of the Jeejeebhoy Hospital and secret agent of one Juggi Bim Chundra, a dealer in silks on Beebe Jan Street, was a curious discolouration, evidently a birthmark, on the Sahib's muscular brown chest. The Sahib, who was bent, with his head thrown back and the towel across his shoulders, missed the man's glance entirely—and a few minutes later he was wrapped about in his bathrobe and ordering brandy-panee for his visitor.

But Abdulla sat in the shadow of the big banana palms, in the very lair of the mosquitoes, and his eyes were filled with much wonder and not a little awe. He sat there from three till the sun went down, regardless of his duties in the hospital. He had fallen on a wonderful thing—so wonderful a thing that it staggered his belief—and he sat still, there in the shadow, trying to realise its reality.

Well, it was true; he could not doubt his own eyesight, aye, his touch, for had he not managed to draw his fingers over the mark while aiding the Sahib with his bathrobe, and felt the raised circle of flesh distinctly? He shivered a little as though he realised some of the tremendous issues at stake. He did not balk at them, as a low-caste Hindu might have done, crying "*Hum greel admi*" [I am a poor, ignorant man,] "Why is this thing thrust on me?" but set himself the task of balancing the pros and cons, ever, be it marked, with a shrewd eye to the

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interests of Abdulla Millik. Meredith had been good to him, and he liked the Sahib, much in the way other natives like other Sahibs. He recognised, too, if the whispers he had heard were true, that it might be dangerous to betray the man who bore that curious mark; but then, again, if he sat and sucked his tongue he was liable to get hungry. And if he took the other side and betrayed the man who lived in Beebe Jan Street, he had not the slightest doubt as to what would happen then, and it wasn't at all pleasant to think of—unless, indeed, the friends of the "mark" were strong enough and willing to pay and protect him. So he sat on in the lengthening shadows, going painfully over the position, again and again, from every point of view his tortuous mind could suggest. But in the end he shivered afresh—the thought of the methods of the man in Beebe Jan Street had conquered all the other thoughts.

So it came to pass that the next day three men left the house in Beebe Jan Street. One, a fakir with his seven-knotted staff, his *lotah* and antelope skin—an ash-begrimed votary of Siva on his way to holy Benares; he went from the Byculla railway station by a fast express train. The second was a *borah*, a travelling pedlar, who took the train for Calcutta, and thence to Segowlie in Behar; he was last seen on the road to Bhimpedi, which is only some thirty miles from Khatmandu, the capital

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of Nepaul, and well within that independent State. The third, and last, was a *mang* [outcast], of whom it may be remarked that he never reached his destination, and there is the greatest probability that he met with foul play before he got to Darjeeling, whither he was bound. The other two, the *borah* and the fakir, undoubtedly reached their destination, though on two occasions the holy man narrowly escaped the fate of the *mang*, during sudden uprisings in Mussulman villages that lay along his route. However, beyond the fact that these two men did undoubtedly reach Khatmandu, they have nothing to do with the story.

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CHAPTER III

"ALLAN, I want you to do me a favour—" said Meredith's visitor, when the first long swallow of the brandy and water had gone comfortably home, "to take a case off my hands, in fact, for a couple of weeks, as I've got to run up to Poonah. Barnes is looking out for all my other patients, but I kind of thought I'd like you to handle this. I know how beastly busy you are on your book, and I wouldn't bother you, but this is quite an exceptional affair, and I think possibly it will interest you, as it seems much along your line."

"Of course I'll take it, old chap!" Meredith answered heartily. "The job of 'house' isn't so arduous as all that. What's the case?"

"Well, now, I'm afraid you've got me, and I must confess I don't understand it. You've heard of these suspended animation fakirs? Well, this seems to be much about the same, only it's a woman, and there's none of the usual mummery about it, although she's well known in the bazaars and there are all sorts of queer stories going round about her."

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Meredith lifted his eyes dubiously.

"No, no; not that sort, Allan; I wouldn't have brought it to you if there'd been anything like that; it's just that she's got a reputation as a kind of wonder-worker, and has quite a following in the temple among the bazaar men. I really don't know just what she does—the nautch business, I suppose, though she seems a cut above that. But my word! Since I was called in to her I've become quite a personage in the Bendi Bazaar; even the Temple Cow made way for me this morning; and the bazaar men fairly get down on their haunches in respectful genuflections.

"Well, as I was saying, this woman—who is known, by the by, as the 'Lady of the Moon,' or some such absurd title—goes into occasional trances. These seem, from all I can gather, to be genuine enough, and she generally gets out of them all right. But about six weeks ago—yes, it was the night you left my place for Ajmere—her man, a devil of a looking chap, brought a *chit*" [letter] "which the woman left before going wherever it is she does go, desiring that I be summoned in case she did not get back on time, or, to be precise, in three days. I was sorry you had left, because I was sure you'd have liked to go along, as it seemed right along the lines of the talk we'd been having.

"Of course I went and saw her; but, as I said, I was entirely at fault. The heart action, respira-

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tion and pulse were certainly low; but beyond that she seemed in a healthy sleep. I had suspected catalepsy, but all the symptoms were absent. As she had left no instructions beyond the *chit* which summoned me to her, and I had absolutely no data on which to work, I determined to give her ten hours more, and then, if she had not waked, to try electricity, and possibly a cold douche. However, when I got there in the early morning, the girl—she's quite young, by the by—was up. She apologised for having troubled me, but there was something in her contained manner that effectually stopped me from either questioning her or attempting to give her any advice on a subject which she apparently understood better than I did.

"I did, however, manage to ask what service she could have possibly expected me to render under the circumstances. Her reply was as unsatisfactory as the whole business, and all I could gather was that my presence and authority would prevent any others from experimenting. From what I saw of her people, though, I judged that they were only too glad to be rid of the responsibility of her condition, to say nothing of experimenting with it—and this despite their evident devotion to her. Later, the woman sent me a handsome fee, and, by consulting me occasionally since then regarding trifling ailments, has apparently established me as her family doctor."

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Meredith sat musing a few moments after his friend had ceased, and then he asked:

"Well, has this inscrutable lady had another attack, or what?"

"Why, yes! I saw her about ten days ago, and I mentioned that I would be away for two or three weeks; she appeared quite put out, and I had to promise that I would leave her case in the hands of some one who was capable, in case she needed help. Then this afternoon, not two hours ago, her man came round to tell me she was off again and that I must go up to her place to-night. I had quite intended to see you about her several days ago, but I've had my head fairly run off, and forgot. Now, what d' y' say?"

Meredith looked at his friend quizzically and then said: "Well, I'll be—— See here, Billy, it's a funny thing and sounds like rot, but I realise, now that it's come, that I've been expecting just some such opportunity as this. The premonition was so pronounced that I tried to realise its source, and, of course, failed. In fact, I'm beginning to doubt if self-analysis is not misleading anyway: the deeper you dig the harder it is to discriminate between sense and nonsense; and really I begin to see some foundation for the general belief that specialists are apt to be a trifle insane outside their particular line."

"Yes——?"

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"And—— Say, look here, old man; I'm going to tell you something mighty curious. You've been jolly good to me, sticking my back up since I've been out here and listening to my vapourings, and I want to inflict you just a bit more before you get away. Now mind, Billy, before I begin: this is distinctly not funny, however it may sound.

William Nicholas, M.D., F.R.S., and several other things, lay back in his chair and puffed lazy smoke-balls at Stubbs. Humour was the last thing of which he would have accused his friend, but it was too hot for unnecessary assurances; so he let Allan proceed without cavil.

"You remember I told you how I had been watching my thoughts closely for some time past, and trying to get a clear sight at their cause and effect; well, I had to drop it. Billy," he continued earnestly, laying his hand on his friend's knee, "I'm afraid there's more than a nerve system back of us, after all."

Nicholas looked at him a trifle sharply but said nothing; and after a moment Meredith went on:

"You know how fascinated I have been with the bazaars of this blessed town—how even the dirt and squalor has not disgusted me, despite the fact that I'm apt to be a trifle fastidious. Well, I had taken hold of this peculiar taste of mine that seemed so incongruous, and had been trying to find its source; but the more I dwelt on the matter the

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more my interest grew, with never the slightest clue as to the why of it.

"Well, one night I walked out from here—oh, I don't know just where I went, but the place was all quiet—and I sat on the wall of a washing-tank and smoked and loafed mentally; and I gradually became conscious of some distant music and let my thoughts drift to it, and I may have fallen asleep—that doesn't matter one way or another—and I dreamed out a *boree* wedding. I've never chanced to see one, but my dream was so strong that to-day I can close my eyes and see the whole fantastic show, smell the flowers and incense, and hear the tomtoms and singing, and—oh well, to cut it short, I woke up—I certainly woke up if I'd been asleep—and the music was still singing faintly in the distance.

"That wouldn't have interested me particularly except in connection with what immediately followed. Over the way from where I was sitting was the stand of a little sweetmeat seller, and he was sitting dozing among his trays and dishes. I walked across and bought some stuff, and talked to him—quizzically, mind you, for he was a dirty little heathen—of poetry and art and love, and he answered my best thought with a better—this puny vender of *ghee* and *jaggery*—and in the cool gray dawn we parted like two brothers. Two days later I sought him out again; he welcomed me joyously, offering me sweet cakes and sherbet for

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refreshment; but his words of welcome had no meaning for me. He spoke some Sanskrit dialect, I think, and it might as well have been Chinese for all I understood; and he stared open-mouthed at my limping attempts to make myself understood in the vernacular. Finally he called a passing *guru*, and a three-cornered talk followed. From it I gathered that my dirty little sweetmeat man was a student of much learning, and that I had come and broken in on his thoughts in the night with other thoughts even more acceptable; that we had conversed for at least three hours in Parbatiya—whatever language that may be—on the ethical side of life, and that I—I, mind you—had quoted long passages from Bhagavata and other standard poetry; and he was justly incensed that I should now come and mock him with pretended ignorance. I tried to explain to the *guru*, but as I was quite at sea myself I doubtless failed; and I confess I hardly blamed him when he drew his learned robe about him and, with a profound obeisance to his friend, stalked off without even a glance at me.

"Now, then, Billy, I've tried to be exact. What d' y' think?"

Nicholas had been watching his friend anxiously over his glasses while the latter told his experience, and he answered quickly as soon as Allan had finished: "There's a train for the hills at 7:45. Come along!"

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Meredith laughed at the determined inference, and then asked, "And what about your interesting lady, Billy?"

"Oh, damn—— I beg her pardon! Let her go to grass! I'll send old Barnes to her; he'll shake her up all right. You come along with me! We'll drop Poonah, and Willis'll be glad to fill your place here, and—— What! You won't? Well, of all the obstinate pigs——"

But Allan only laughed on, and then interrupted his friend's vituperation: "No, no; I'm not as bad as that, though it's awfully good of you, and I'll tell you what I will do. You finish up your work for the next month as you intended, and I'll be through the chapter that's bothering me; then we'll skip specialising and general practice together and do what you so rudely said of the lady—'go to grass'—for six long weeks. Not a sanitarium, though; that don't go. We'll run in to Behar, and put up with old McKenzie. Eh? What d' y' say?"

"I'd rather you'd go to-night, Allan."

"Not for a thousand rupees! Look here, Nick; I know just how suspicious my story must seem, and I'd feel queer if you, for instance, or any other chap, sprung it on me. But, truly, I never was further from a breakdown than I am to-day; I'm disgustingly well from top to toe, and that, too, despite the heat. No; I've a fair idea of

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what has happened, though I'm a bit off on the *modus operandi.*

"These wily old fakirs that you have here get into their trance states by internal concentration—there's nothing like it for self-hypnotisation—and that's just about what's happened to me. I've been analysing my mentality till the inevitable reaction has set in. Now I know enough to be quite sure that this is a perfectly normal physiological process—we have lots of data to fall back on—and the only difficulty that presents itself is the peculiar phase of the hallucinations. What on earth can I possibly have in common with native poetry and music and a lot of tommyrot like that? It's the exact opposite of my temperament, if I know myself at all. I don't care for those things in my own language—I'm too cold-blooded, I suppose. Why! I'm thirty-one next month, and I've never even imagined that I was in love in my whole life—never thought twice of the handsomest girl I ever met, here or back at home. And yet, within the last month I've caught myself following some graceful little bazaar girl with approving eyes, and catching a hint of melody in the click of her silver anklets. It isn't disagreeable while it lasts; but afterward, I feel like an ass when I come to think it out. Five years ago I would have let it go at that, but to-day I want to know why I am this particular kind of ass; and I shall be tremendously indebted to your

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erratic patient if she supplies the data to put me on the right track."

. . . . . .

Doctor Nicholas left for Poonah that night with some misgivings about his friend still lingering in his mind, but he had known the man long and had admired his perfect self-control under many trying conditions, so he concluded that Meredith would—as he always did—work out his salvation along his own lines.

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CHAPTER IV

At eight o'clock sharp that night Gaffir Ben Ali, Doctor Nicholas's general factotum, arrived according to arrangement to conduct Meredith to his new patient. The Doctor chose to walk, as he always did at night when the distances were not too great, and Ben Ali, nothing loath, led him through a labyrinth of still busy streets, passing by strange, unfamiliar cuts from quarter to quarter. Meredith wandered contentedly by his side through the narrow, crowded byways, with their pungent odours and strange medley of sight and sound, with their colour harmonies and jarring discords, till at last they came on quieter places; and back of the Bendi Bazaar, Ben Ali finally halted.

There was a tiny court out of which ran passages in all directions, while the windows were set high and shuttered tight. The *bandicoots* scurried away before their advance, with deep, throaty growls that challenged defiantly long after they had gone to cover in the surrounding shadows.

Ali stopped in the middle of this court and, raising his voice, cried aloud in a musical drawl: "*Ho—i—*

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Ben Israel Ben Alif—aow hither aow jeldi; Hazoor hai!"

And as they stood waiting under the little oil-cup lamp, with its feeble floating light, there came a faint clicking here and there from the shuttered windows, and they knew that curious eyes were watching them.

A moment later one of these shutters swung open and a gruff voice queried: "*Ca mungta tum?*" which was answered by Ali, "*Hakim Sahib hai.*" And then the shutter closed again, and later came the sound of a door opening along one of the passages, then a distant light from a lantern and the strange, squat form of a dwarf carrying it.

He raised the light and peered at the Doctor curiously; then, with a surly "*Salaam, Hakim Sahib,*" and a curt nod to Ali, he preceded them along the passage.

Meredith marked him curiously as he rolled before them, and concluded that he was the most wonderful specimen of anatomy he had ever seen, for he seemed absolutely broader than he was long, and the Doctor noticed that he had to crook his arm to prevent the lantern dragging on the floor.

He led them in through a narrow wicket gate set in the wall, and after they had passed, closed it carefully, dropping a thick teak bar that locked into the wall on either side. They followed him up the narrow, twisted stairway and into a little

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anteroom, where, having hung his lantern, he signed to them to wait, and lifting the *purdah*, disappeared.

"What kind of a man is he?" questioned Meredith of Ali, when the sound of the man's going had died away.

"*Arre, eunuch hai Sahib*," answered his guide with a sniff.

"A eunuch, hey! I didn't know you had such things here. Is he a Mussulman?"

"Allah is merciful, Sahib," the man returned with a most comprehensive shrug. "Who am I that I should judge? Besides," he added in a whisper and with a sour grimace, "the Sahib may judge of both his temper and strength, and I may add that his ears are very long."

The sound of the man's heavy shuffling steps in the room beyond stopped all further questioning.

"The Hakim Sahib will be pleased to come. Ben Ali, thou canst wait here for the Sahib."

Meredith followed the man along a dimly lighted passage from which he could make out that numerous rooms gave off. Through one or two of these they passed, and, though he looked about curiously, the furnishing of the place was but barely suggested in the dim light.

"Enter, Sahib." A *purdah* was raised, and the whole scene changed.

He stood a moment on the threshold astonished,

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then recovering, advanced into the room. The light was soft and rosy, and everywhere it touched, revealed one beauty and suggested others. His feet sank deep in costly rugs, and wherever his eyes ranged they were met with harmonies of colour that blended into quiet, restful shadows. The long, cool sweep of the *punka*, too, seemed to bring a hint of perfume on its breath, yet waved it aside ere the senses had grasped it.

He became conscious, almost immediately, of two figures genuflecting profoundly before him—a shriveled old woman and a dainty bit of a girl—and then his glance passed and rested on the broad couch beyond. There was his patient, undoubtedly; and he walked over and looked down curiously on her. He hardly knew what manner of woman he had expected to see, but the reality startled him, and he drew back a moment as though his gaze had been a profanation.

She was lying there among the piled-up cushions with the pretty, careless grace of a tired child. A big creamy rose was nestled at her throat, and a spray of jasmine was twisted among the strands of her hair. The man grew a little irritated as he looked, despite his admiration—she was too absolutely, perfectly well to suit his professional expectation, which had been stimulated by I don't know what imaginings concerning her. He noticed the silky sheen of the fabrics that clung about her,

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suggesting the form that they hid, and the thought passed uneasily through his brain that no woman's art could have posed her better for the delight of a coming lover. The thought was dismissed with a callous shrug as he turned to the dwarf who still stood glowering in the shadow of the doorway.

"Well, what can I do? What do you want?"

"The Sahib knows best; she has lain thus for five days and nights—the longest she ever stayed away."

Meredith eyed him suspiciously, and then, "How comes it that the flowers are so fresh?" he demanded sharply; "they would have died before the third day."

"The wisdom of Hazoor is great," the man answered with sarcastic humility, "but the women, Sahib, they care for her: a fresh rose wet with the dew each day. They say it feeds her, Sahib; I say nothing."

Meredith went back to the couch and, taking out a little pocket thermometer, drew back the girl's wide silk sleeve and slipped the bulb beneath; but her arm fell back supinely and he had to kneel beside her and hold it in place. When he rose his hands were a trifle shaky and his face flushed. He muttered, dissatisfied at the low record, and then timed her pulse. When he had done, his professional instincts were clearly aroused; he saw, despite the appearance of health, that the vitality

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was at its lowest ebb. And yet, what to do? There was no known rational method of treatment, as he knew too well; the method that might quicken one would very possibly drive out the last spark of life from another. Had there been the rigours of catalepsy, he would have resorted to drastic measures; but with this girl, seemingly as delicate as some hothouse flower, he was completely at a loss.

"Has she ever been as low as this before?" he asked over his shoulder of the man.

"I cannot say, Sahib; but she seemed to fear before she went and bade me keep the Hakim Sahib at hand, in case she did not get back on time."

"On time! What time?"

"Twelve by the clock, yesternight."

"Has she always waked punctually?"

"Except once, Sahib."

"To the minute?"

"Nay, Sahib; but surely before the flow of the tide."

"The flow of the tide?"

"Yes, Sahib; she always comes back with the tide; sometimes almost with the turn, and then again not till the flow."

"Well, my good man, I don't see what I can do. If I apply a battery, or anything like that, she may never get back at all—tide or no tide. Did she leave no directions whatever?"

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"Yes, Sahib; she left a little powder, and if she did not come back with to-night's tide, the Hakim Sahib was to put it on her tongue, but——"

"Confound you! Why didn't you say so before; keeping me—— What?"

"Sahib, on no account was it to be used before the full tide had come."

"Well, I'm going to stay and see this thing through. Give me the powder, and er—— What time is your precious tide full, anyway? Two o'clock? Well, at five minutes past I'll try the powder, and if it doesn't act in half an hour I shall take my chances with the battery."

"*Uccha*, Sahib; the wisdom of the Prophet doubtless guides the *Gurreepurwan*," answered the man, but his face decidedly belied the compliment.

"Give this *chit* to Ali; he will carry it to the hospital and bring the medicine I may have need of; then you may keep him or let him go, as you please."

Meredith stood for a moment as the *purdah* dropped behind the dwarf, then began a wandering and curious inspection of the room. He felt a little surprised that its almost wanton luxury was not more distasteful to him, and he halted now and again before some carved vase or statuette in amazed admiration at both its beauty and obvious value. What manner of woman was this who lived like a queen in a gem-strewn palace, situate, if you please, in a blind alley back of the Bendi

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Bazaar? Certainly not the kind to appeal to him! He was not given to ideals, or at any rate to the formulating of them; he was a searcher after Truth, and his demand was that she should be exact rather than beautiful. Back in his subjective mind, in the locked and dusty chamber of romance, there probably dwelt a woman who some day might get out, and who would walk with him and talk with him in a quiet, serious way—a Burne-Jones girl, though perhaps a little stouter—a trifle bovine—who would keep his house even as he now kept his rooms, orderly and unembarrassed by foolish trappings. And Love? Well, he, too, would be sober and kindly, submitting to analysis and yielding gracefully to Truth—maybe. Anyway, he would never be a bad little black-haired villain, with flashing eyes and a doubtful temper; a disturber of the peace with imperious ways—ways of passion and tears and roses and—— And then the distant chimes from the law courts broke the stillness faintly, and a moment later the thin bugle notes of the Sepoys' Recall.

He roused from his reverie and found himself gazing down at his patient, then turned impatiently away and continued his investigation of the room. He noted a curious glimmering among the farther shadows, and thinking it was from a curtained window, crossed over and drew back the tapestry through which the light was shining.

He could barely restrain a cry of astonishment

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at what he saw, and did spring nervously backward, but quickly recovered himself. In the centre of what appeared to be a small alcove was set a great crystal, and this crystal itself was the source of the light. Two huge cobras with hoods aggressively spread were curled poised, one on either side of the great glass, and it was only their continued rigidity that demonstrated their harmlessness. Satisfied that they were not living things, he advanced closer and touched their scales and hooded heads; but the modeling was so perfect that he withdrew his hand with a shudder, and then he forgot the serpents in his wonder over the crystal. It was a great egg-shaped globe set up on four glass balls, which were in turn supported by four glass pillars. On either side in front were the serpents, while behind was a stretch of black velvet from out of which the crystal stood vividly like some bright curious living thing. The only light in the alcove was shed from its glowing centre, and this pulsed slowly and unevenly, now springing to a dazzling fire, and anon paling to a faint phosphorescent shimmer. He stooped to try and see the source of this wonder, felt carefully round the legs and under the lower glass stand for some connecting wires, and then came up from his knees in confusion as the dwarf's voice spoke gruffly to him:

"When the Sahib has satisfied his curiosity, perhaps he will partake of some little refreshment."

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Ben Alif was holding the curtains back, and Meredith passed out from the alcove with considerable loss of dignity. He would have liked to kick the dwarf, but, apart from the man's size, he realised that he had been himself quite at fault. What on earth had he to do poking behind curtains in a strange house? He certainly would never have dreamed of doing so while visiting a European, and he told himself severely that there was no possible excuse for him here; and then he straightway began to wonder about the crystal again. He would have questioned Ben Alif, but he had recognised from the start that the man's attitude was antagonistic, so he was forced to let the matter drop.

"That was nine o'clock that struck, was it not?" he asked, by way of breaking the awkwardness.

"Yes, Sahib; nine gone by the clock."

"And the tide still wants five hours of the full?"

"Five hours, Sahib."

He drew up a big cushioned chair to the couch, and Alif wheeled a table to his side, on which were several silver trays with piled-up heaps of sweetmeats, together with long, slender cigarettes and black, evil-looking cigars; then, making a place among the liquor flasks and glasses, he set a bronze gong, with the intimation that a single stroke would reach him where he sat beyond the *purdah*.

Meredith lay back and watched the smoke from his cigarette curl away lazy and gray till the breeze

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from the *punka* caught it and hurried it in writhing ribbons to the shadows. He had been conscious, ever since he first entered the room, of the fixed attention of the two waiting-women. They were watching him from the shadows at the foot of the couch, barely distinguishable from the figured tapestry against which they crouched. The old woman had lighted a *birri*, and its pungent odour mixed in strongly with the perfumed tobacco smoke. The two were surrounded with an array of little pots, bronze, earthenware and silver, and with curiously shaped metal plates; these contained various aromatic herbs, spices, areca seed, cardamoms, betel leaf and the like, out of which, together with wet lime, they made little sandwiches and regaled themselves.

They were quite silent save for an occasional guarded whisper, or the click of a silver anklet as they stirred and stretched among their pillows. By and by even the faint whispering ceased; the spark from the *birri* died out; and a deeper hush seemed to fall on the room—a quiet that vaguely oppressed the man in the chair. He looked at his watch in the dim light, and barely distinguished that it lacked some twenty minutes of eleven. More than three hours to wait—and lord! how stupid and sleepy he felt. He roused himself with an effort, and took his patient's pulse and temperature; then, kneeling on the cushions that lay piled

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at the side of her couch, he tried to rouse her by pressure of his fingers and thumb on the frontal and suborbital nerves. He failed entirely, and drew his hands away from her brow. Even as he did so, a quick strange sense of being watched stole over him. He glanced back of his shoulder hurriedly and then beyond, to the two women; but they lay supine with the ends of their *saris* drawn across their faces.

He noted again the curious pulsing light that glimmered through the curtain from the alcove where the crystal stood, and commenced to mentally demonstrate its innate absurdity; the thing was clearly insulated, as he had satisfied himself, and yet—yes, as he was thinking, he—yes, that was it—and he drooped forward into a more comfortable position. There was a moment when his mentality tried to hold on to the thread of its argument, a moment of resistance—and then quiescence.

His head drooped languidly toward the couch, and it was borne in on him dreamily that the woman lying there was unreal—that the real woman was just back of his shoulder, watching him, aye, and touching him with strange magnetic touch that weighed him down, lower and lower. Then came a whispering, vague and faint. He strove to catch its meaning, but ever the dulling touch of the woman's fingers prevented him.

The whisperings grew to a muttering, and drew

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nearer and yet nearer. He struggled fiercely to rise and face it, but only drooped the more, till he lay prone, half on the cushions and half across the foot of the couch. Then came a patter of naked feet—stealthily at first, then more bold—and with it a cold rushing wind and a growing horror of sound! A storm of water and darkness grew swiftly around him, and out of it another storm—of men, or things that cursed like men. He felt their hot, eager breath as they pressed through the darkness on him—felt the ground tremble with the shock of their coming—and for one long instant his soul seemed to melt with utter, impotent fear—and then—— And then there came a woman's laugh—musical, scornful, sweet, and cutting as a lash.

As it fell on the man's ears he started up with a cry and, seizing the gong-stick, struck the bronze plate fiercely. "Ho, Alif! Ben Al——"

"*Sahib, ca hai?*"

The voice fell coolly at his shoulder, questioning his wants, and he turned savagely on the man, demanding angrily what he meant by daring to laugh "like a Son of Sheitan" and so disturb his reflections.

But the fellow protested vigorously: "Sahib, I did not laugh."

"Thou didst not, thou black *bhudmash!* Then who did?—for I swear some one laughed."

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"Perchance Kubberwan slept, and an angel laughed."

"Slept, you villain! I—I did not sleep!"

"Neither did I laugh, Hazoor."

"Well, I heard—— What time is it?"

"Half after two, gone by the clock, Sahib. The tide has passed the full, Kubberwan."

"What!" He swung round to the couch quickly, then fell back rubbing his eyes incredulously. The girl was sitting up among the pillows, watching him through half-closed eyes that seemed full of mockery.

Was it an angel that had laughed?

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CHAPTER V

THE dawn was breaking cool and gray as Meredith parted from Ben Alif, who had served as his guide through the tangle of courts and alleyways that shut in the house of Loda. The two men parted abruptly, and somewhat surlily, at the corner of the Byculla Road—Ben Alif, after his fashion; and Meredith, because he was irritated as well as perplexed by the outcome of his visit. There was a sense of littleness, of failure, that stung him; also, a vague suspicion that in some manner he had been tricked; though the more he strove to determine how and when and why, the more vague and absurd his suspicions seemed. He had fallen asleep while watching an interesting case, and surely, if there was any blame, he deserved it himself. That he had been disturbed by restless dreams was hardly a matter for wonder, considering the peculiarity of his surroundings; while as for the girl's sudden return to life, he had been warned by his friend's precedent to expect some such ending; and it was certainly only a matter of courtesy on her part to let him sleep on to a natural awakening when he had been watching so long in her service.

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Still, when he had settled the matter thus, there remained a something that would not down—a something that men call intuition, perhaps, which they deride as impracticable, and systematically suppress, yet which, if they only learned to trust, would prove a very lodestar for the betterment of their lives and fortunes.

Stubbs sniffed round him curiously when he entered his rooms, and it was with an irritable gesture that he shook off the impression that the dog, too, sensed something wrong with him. He took a cold sponge-bath, and then, as he was rubbing down in front of his mirror, his eye was caught by the curious birthmark on his chest, and it seemed, in his nervous state, that even this had assumed an unfamiliar aspect. He passed his fingers over the circle, and for the first time in his life it struck him as bearing a resemblance to a hazy moon. The fancy held him a moment, and then he smiled at the conceit—a moon indeed! And why not an orange, or a mango, or, better still, Stubbs's dog-collar? But nevertheless the fancy stuck, and afterward, whenever the mark attracted his attention, the idea came along. Just why the moon, and not the dog-collar, reached the motor tracts of his brain and perpetuated itself is, of course, outside present discussion.

During the next few days Meredith devoted a good deal of serious thought not only to the case of

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Loda, but to his own mental attitude which had made possible the peculiar phenomena which he had discussed with his friend Nicholas. The result was a term of considerable mental depression. His facts concerning both the woman and himself were most elusive, so intimately had the fantastic been blended with the real in his experience. Added to this, he realised with some irritation that, in the case of Loda, the woman herself and not the scientific aspect was the dominant note, and that he had been directly affected by it. He had always held the Will to be supreme, yet here were happenings absolutely opposed to its expression—strange forces affecting him vitally where neither force nor sensibility should exist. The more he followed out the line of thought suggested, the more perplexed and less capable of cool judgment he grew. Things he had adjudged monstrous and absurd rose up and demanded a fresh hearing, and the more he yielded to their demands the stronger they grew. He realised that he was in no condition, physically or mentally, to arrive at a logical diagnosis; he was out of focus, but, instead of resting awhile, he persisted with a sick man's fatuity, until his whole system rebelled.

As a direct result, he began to doubt his own judgment. Premises which he had considered incontrovertible—postulates formulated from cool logical deductions—began to look arbitrary. Was there

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something after all back of this nerve envelope—something that was perhaps mocking him, laughing at the postulates that ignored *it?* The thought was intolerable, and he shook it off angrily. If his science of life was wrong in any one vital particular, then he was hopelessly at fault in the whole of his reasoning; and beyond his reason, he had nothing—there *was* nothing. This he had persistently and logically demonstrated to his own mental satisfaction, and now, just as he was about to give his deductions to the world, he had this uneasy feeling that Something, Somewhere, was laughing at him.

He finally resolved on what he realised should have been his course from the first—to do no thinking at all for a while; to let those few last vital chapters of his book lie over till he was able to treat them with his old-time mental zest and vigour.

The evening of the day on which Meredith arrived at this decision, the servant brought word to his room that a man was waiting on the veranda with a *chit* which he refused to deliver except to the Doctor Sahib personally. He ordered him to be admitted, and was astonished a few moments later to see Ben Alif, the dwarf and body-servant of Loda, blocking up his doorway. The man salaamed in his usual surly way and handed him a letter, and, fumbling in the folds of his *dhotee*, he produced a small package, together with a modern receipt book, which he presented to Meredith for his signature.

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He signed for both letter and package, and then, telling the man to wait, he broke the seal and read. It was a note of thanks from Loda for his care, and a request that the lady might be privileged to consult him occasionally when indisposed. A check was enclosed on a prominent Bombay bank for 100 rupees.

The postscript, however, was the curious part; for the writer, after paying a compliment to his scientific repute, begged his acceptance of a little trifle, of beads and glass, which was said to possess the wonderful power of clearing the mentality of any one who gazed into it. If they were in doubt at any time and had recourse to the glass, it would, according to its traditions, resolve those doubts directly, and would make the wisest decision readily apparent. The lady professed to be dubious herself as to its potency, and asked the Doctor to kindly let her have his opinion from a critical standpoint, as she was anxious to decide whether metals and the like could be made to transmit influences.

He decided, after a moment's thought, to return the package unopened—it would seem churlish, but he felt a certain repugnance to mixing up in any such childish matter. What did the lady take him for?

He turned toward the door with the package in his hand and then opened his eyes wide. Ben Alif had gone and the door was closed behind him. He started to call his *hamal*, determined to

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send the thing back anyway, and then he paused as it struck him that there would be a very pretty bit of gossip in the servants' quarters if he sent that dainty little package to a lady so well known as Madam Loda.

He stood at his table under the lamplight, balancing the thing on his fingers while his thoughts wandered away to the sender. Of course she didn't mean to bother him, and it would be, after all, beastly rude to send the thing back abruptly, as he was about to do. He would never have dared do so to an English lady, and this girl—— Well, of course she wasn't an English lady, but what of that? She was certainly far and away the loveliest girl he had ever seen, and—— Oh, well, he wasn't going to hurt her feelings, anyway. She was evidently impressed with him and wanted to be friends. Why not? Perhaps he might be of some real help to her—get her to change her ways of life—get her away from those evil, smelly bazaars. Here on a sudden a small inward voice questioned him: "And *then* what?"

He laughed a bit awkwardly and his colour rose; then he muttered something very uncomplimentary of himself and pitched the package over on the sideboard. He lighted a big black cheroot and sat reading, or trying to read, a medical journal, but all the time he was conscious of the presence of Loda. He saw her lying stretched out luxuriously on her

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couch, with the rose at her lips, even while another sense was automatically perusing cut and dried medical facts. By and by even this pretense ceased, and he gradually allowed her to envelop him; he sat staring out into the tobacco smoke and let his thoughts drift about her in a kind of sensuous ease. He vaguely realised that he had been tending toward this ever since he left her side, and wondered, in an equally vague manner, why he had resisted it so absurdly. He smiled lazily as he thought of her method of life, her calling—a witch, forsooth! Well, if this were witchery, he had nothing to complain of. Of course he didn't mean anything; he would probably send her box back to-morrow or the next day, and meantime he was only drifting idly a little bit to-night.

He fell asleep in his chair, and woke an hour later distraught and anxious. He had dreamed of the little package; that he had lost it; and that it contained a jewel which he prized more highly than life itself. He shook himself clear of sleep and crossed to the sideboard, took up the package, broke the silken strings, and opened a simple cardboard box.

Inside lay a round yellow crystal—a moon with a delicate fringe of pale pearls, and back of it a twisted gold wire which might either serve for a handle or, perchance, to pin in a turban. It was a pretty toy, of far more value, evidently, than the lady had chosen to state, and he turned it over and about in his hands

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admiringly, and then looked squarely into its cloudy depths. He gazed curiously for a moment, then started abruptly; and, raising the crystal closer to his eyes, examined it minutely front and back. He passed the back of his hand over his eyes before he looked again, and after his second glance his face whitened perceptibly under its tan. After that he smiled a little doubtfully and with some effort. Then laying the trinket down on the table, he stuck both fists in his eyes, and, after giving them a hard rub, walked over to the sideboard, where he poured out a stiff dose of brandy and swallowed it at a draught.

There was a box of black cheroots on the sideboard. After carefully selecting one, he lighted it at the lamp chimney and proceeded to walk back and forth from one end of the long low room to the other. Now and again his eyes wandered over toward the table where the crystal lay radiant in the circle of lamplight, but each time he resolutely brought them back and steadily contemplated the scarlet tip of his cigar. By and by, finding this was hardly enough to hold his mind intact, he began to repeat monotonously, as they occurred to him, sentences from the earlier chapters of his book, blending a certain slow rhythm of words with his footsteps. At the end of some twenty minutes he threw aside his cigar butt and stretched himself with arms flung wide above his head. He walked about the room, setting it to rights here and there, patted

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Stubbs, who was lying on the lounge watching him, and finally, having got himself into what he considered to be a thoroughly rational condition, he approached the centre-table with a certain jaunty air and took up the perplexing crystal again.

He gazed at it carelessly, almost cynically, and for a moment or so with impunity; then his face gradually changed.

"Good—God!" It wasn't so much an exclamation of profanity as of absolute hopeless bewilderment. He rubbed his eyes as he had done before and looked again. The nebulous yellow clouds in the heart of the crystal were certainly *moving*—slowly, indeed, and with a barely perceptible unfolding at first, but later, as he continued to gaze, the action grew more rapid, till they fairly *seethed* under his astonished gaze.

He gave a great start as Stubbs's nose came curiously sniffing at his legs. He had been too much engrossed to notice the dog, and would have ignored him now but that after the first sniff at his master he retired under the table with a white ridge of hair showing on his spine, and as Meredith moved toward him he edged farther back with a low, threatening growl.

The Doctor eyed him curiously as he sat backed up to the table leg; then he laid the crystal carefully on a tabaret and seated himself in a big, roomy cane chair close at hand.

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"Come here, Stubbs."

No answer save an uneasy shuffle.

"Come, boy; come out here."

This time there was a rather pitiful whine from the shadow where the dog sat, but no other response.

"Come, doggie, poor old chap; come boy."

The man stretched out his hand coaxingly, and it proved too much for Stubbs, who crawled out slowly and with evident doubt, with tail drooped and a general air of discomfort. Nearly on his belly, he crawled inch by inch to his master and crouched against his knees, licking the hands he loved; but there was a furtive look in his eyes, and an utter lack of his usual spontaneity.

Meredith played with him for a while and then proceeded to test the idea that had come to him The dog was an English bull of the famous Rodney strain, and, so far as his master had been able to judge, was as sweet tempered and free from caprice as he was plucky and faithful, and, with this one exception, had never shown even a sign of ugliness. The man was almost ashamed of himself for his credulity as he drew the tabaret close to his elbow, but this was of short duration, for he had hardly laid his fingers on the crystal when he felt the dog all a-tremble in his arms. It was quite impossible that the beast could have caught any sight of either his master's hand or the trinket, as both lay on the tabaret above him and entirely out of his line of vision.

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Meredith let go of the crystal, and with a very perplexed air began to comfort the dog, who grew slowly quieter. He had been willing to impute his own experience to some auto-suggestion due to his state of health and probably excited by the girl's letter, but he utterly declined to accept the same hypothesis concerning the dog. Twice he tried the same thing, cautiously, and making sure that the dog's head was actually hidden; and each time, the instant his fingers touched the crystal Stubbs began his trembling afresh. The last time the dog struggled and growled in his arms and he was forced to let him go.

He smiled grimly as he re-read Loda's letter. Far from clearing his mind, as promised, her little gift had, in a manner that seemed almost diabolical, reduced him to a state of hopeless mental muddle.

He expected to lie awake, after his custom of late, and fret himself with vain conjectures the live-long night, but he slept soundly and waked fresh and buoyant for his *chota-hazri* [little breakfast], and with a firm resolve to find out the riddle of the crystal. Stubbs had also recovered his equanimity, and there was a mutual readjustment of conditions between the two, each doubtless making generous allowance for the other's imbecility.

So Meredith's investigation of the crystal became an absorbing study. His curiosity was thoroughly roused; the thing was so utterly impossible, so en-

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tirely beyond intelligent research; and it fascinated him as nothing in his life ever had before. He recognised clearly that the glass exerted some strong uncomfortable influence over Stubbs, but, strangely enough, he failed to grasp the fact that he himself was being affected; yet such was undoubtedly the case. While away from the thing, and engaged in his daily business, he scouted the idea of magic with all his old-time positive vigour; yet each time he gazed into its yellow depths he seemed to grow a little less positive, a little more negative, although so far he had seen nothing but the stirring of the depths, with now and again a suggestion of shadowy forms like those on the ground-glass of a camera when the lens is out of focus. But each day he grew more expectant, more sure that there was something banking up in that little yellow glass that was of vital importance to his welfare. Also, he had a most curious feeling that he knew just what this something was, only it had slipped his memory.

Another significant matter was a certain growth of mental intimacy with Loda. Her personality and magnetism seemed to pervade the crystal; and of an evening, after he had been examining it and was drowsing over his tobacco, he would be so conscious of her presence that again and again he would look around curiously as though expecting to see her in the very flesh.

Just how much of this degenerate condition was

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due directly to Loda's influence and mentality, and how much to the state of health that rendered his brain negative to such influence, is impossible to determine. And, mind you, there was no physical decadence—his cheeks were brown and ruddy and all his flesh firm and well—but a certain mental and moral lethargy surely possessed him to the utter detriment of that positive element that had made him a man of mark among his *confreres*.

Finally a day came when the desire to see Loda again took definite place in his consciousness. Doubtless it had been formulating there for days, but it seemed to leap to life and power in his brain with a suddenness that startled him.

He was standing in one of the medical wards at the bedside of a consumptive Hindu. A fat little brown apothecary was taking down his prescriptions in an order book. When half way through the order the Doctor Sahib paused suddenly and looked rather perplexed, frowned savagely at the apothecary, and walked off to the next bed. When the man reminded him of the unfinished prescription, he laughed awkwardly and corrected his mistake. But for the rest of the morning he found it extremely difficult to give his attention to his cases; he was absent-minded, and both the students and apothecaries noticed it and commented on it later.

Before this he had never got beyond a vague possibility of seeing the girl again at some indefinite

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future time. To be sure, of late he had dallied with the idea, often conjuring up in his imagination charming pictures of Loda—of her grace, her beauty, her subtle magnetic charm—till slowly but surely his attitude toward her had changed from cold criticism and suspicion to a puzzled interest and a half-awakened desire. This smouldering desire sprang suddenly into flame that morning, but while he was surprised and distracted by its force and direction—for it came almost in the form of a sentence, a command, "Go and see Loda!"—he had not the slightest intention of complying with the order.

Later, however, in the quiet of his room after the ward work was done, he found his desires strongly siding with the suggestion, and he was soon deliberating lazily between the pros and cons of the matter. Back of this dalliance, however, was an uneasy conviction that yielding meant loss—loss irreparable, though undefined. He lay back in his chair and it seemed to him that afternoon that he was but a negative third party, while two other positive parties were fighting over his decision. Finally, when he was nearly weary, an idea occurred: Why not try if the crystal would settle the matter as Loda had suggested that it would? So far he had not really tested it, but had merely worried over it, and the more he had worried the less able he seemed to solve its secret.

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He walked over to his desk and opened the drawer where he kept the charm, then seated himself again and looked quietly into its evasive depths, demanding at the same time a clear judgment on the matter perplexing him. He endeavoured to keep his mind as unprejudiced as possible while he looked, but as soon as the yellow bosom of the thing began to heave, he lost—as he always did—some of his balance. He grew absorbed, and gradually, in part, let go his hold on his conscious connection with his surroundings, while the manifestations of the crystal assumed an importance that dwarfed all else. The yellow clouds, bellied big with mystery, seemed to draw him into their depths, to absorb him, dimming his sight, stopping his ears, aye, pressing on his heart and modifying its beat, while the whole universe became a great rhythmic pulse whose vibratory note, "Tin—ti-tit—tar"—"Tin—ti-tit—tar," swelled fast and loud through the yellow fog, then sank away faint and distant as the fog banked up again.

Some one rapped smartly on the locked door, and, later, rattled the handle. The sound reached Meredith, but it held no significance for him whatever. He had got deeper into the crystal than ever before, and was intent on forcing his way to its very centre, where he knew some strange desire of his heart was hiding.

"Tin—ti-tit—tar"—"Tin—ti-tit—tar."

Louder, louder and closer it came, till its roar

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was fairly deafening! He knew that he was whirling naked in a cataclysm of yellow foam—whirling through void spaces—and that that rhythmic bell-note was the symbol of the power that held his soul true to its course.

Then, slowly, the clouds grew translucent; delicate rainbow tints shone through, and the "Tin—ti-tit—tar" sank to a slow and distant musical measure. The wild rushing course was done; and there, veiled in the gray and rosy mists, he found the hidden desire. How she came or whence or why he neither knew nor cared—but he was looking deep into *Loda's* eyes! They were soft, and dark, and restful, and they enveloped him even as the clouds had done; they were full of things unutterable, things he had known long ages ago and since forgot. And by and by he saw, besides her eyes, the rich dark splendour of her face, hidden here and there by trailing hair and mist. There came a scent of jasmine and of roses—a halo of dim pearls held her for a moment thus, beckoning him—and then the pearls held naught save the crystal in his hand, and its yellow bosom lay clouded and still.

The French travelling clock on his desk seemed to say "Tin—ti-tit—tar"—"Tin—ti-tit—tar," and he looked at it curiously. Where had he heard that sound before?

"Jove!" It was six o'clock, and he'd fallen asleep with that absurd crystal in his hand and had

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dreamed! Now what the devil had he dreamed? Ah, yes; it was Loda. And he was going to see her this evening when it grew a little cooler. The question of expediency was forgotten—wiped out as completely as though it had never risen. The crystal had vindicated its reputation!

. . . . . .

"Sahib! Beattie Sahib, Surgeon Gen-air-el was here at five o'clock."

"The devil, boy! Why didn't you call me?"

"Sahib, I—that is, we—Buram Singh and I—both rapped on the door, and shook it by the handle. Was the Sahib asleep?"

"Jove! I suppose I was; though how I got off so soundly I can't imagine!"

"Sahib, the dog also I think is sick. Buram Singh says he hear him whining inside the room before he knock, and later, when I entered, he was lying in the corner, with his head under the side-board, Sahib, as if he'd seen a *bhoot*" [ghost]. "I had trouble to make him quiet, and, Sahib, if he had not known me so well, I think he would have bitten me."

"See here, boy," answered Meredith, testily, "I believe that dog's going crazy; he's growled at me twice lately, and I won't have it. I don't want to have him shot, but—— Well, you'd better watch him."

"*Arre*, Sahib! Shoot Stubbs! Why, Sahib, he's

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a Rodney strain dog—the finest, they say, in the Presidency, Sahib. Possibly it is a worm that worries him, Sahib: I will give him a dose of male fern, and Sahib shall see."

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CHAPTER VI

IT was nine o'clock in the evening when Meredith turned out of Grant Road and started through the labyrinth of side-streets and alleys for the corner of the Copper Smith Bazaar, from whence he felt sure he could find his way to the little court where Loda had her dwelling. He might easily have taken a *hamal* as guide, or have asked his way and so made certain of finding it, but he was keenly alive to the unconventionality of his visit, and, while that added to its fascination, he was not at all desirous of any comment upon the matter.

He stopped a moment under the awning of a pretty little *birri* seller and told her, after she had lighted his cigar, just how pretty he thought her. His Hindustanee was far from perfect, and the maiden laughed gaily at his lamely worded compliment, but she gave him a little spray of jasmine from her hair just the same. He smelled it, and, fastening it in his coat, sauntered on down the street. He noticed that the place seemed almost deserted, and recollected that there was some festival, and that Hindus and Moslems alike were probably gathered at some of the larger temples.

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He skirted Camatepura and cut into a narrow, illy lighted side-street. On the corner, a beggar hailed him from the edge of the gutter. He was binding up a sore leg in the light of a flickering oil lamp that was fastened to the wall back of him, and on catching sight of the "Sahib" he cried aloud to heaven and this "Protector of the Poor," in a harsh strident voice, demanding rather than begging alms. "*Bakshish, Sahib, bakshish do; hum greel admi.*"

The fellow stumbled grovelingly in the gutter, exposing his sores and praying lustily for a little charity. Meredith had seen too many such to be easily moved, besides which, he felt distinctly antagonised by the fellow's truculent tone; so he brushed carelessly by, with a curt order to go to the hospital if he needed assistance.

But the man declined to be shaken off so, and followed on at the Doctor's heels, limping and hopping, and wailing out an inexhaustible list of his infirmities in a voice that might be heard half a mile away.

Considerably annoyed at the fellow's persistence, Meredith hurried his steps somewhat. The man, however, notwithstanding his crippled condition, stuck to him gamely till they came to the rear of the Bali Temple, where the lane closed up narrowly owing to the encroachment of the outer wall of the back court. Here his tormentor drew

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fairly abreast of him, brushing him with his foul rags as he flung out his gaunt arms in abandoned declamation.

Meredith turned on him angrily then and the fellow slipped back a little, whimpering, and cried aloud to the Sahib not to strike him—that he was poor and sick.

The Doctor, who had not even raised his cane, swore at him roundly, making up in English what fluency he lacked in the vernacular. And while he was still relieving himself, he was interrupted by a cry at his back: "*Sahib, Sahib, bakshish do!*"

He wheeled round savagely, and found two other beggars confronting him from the shadows of the temple, while a fourth was hobbling up the lane from beyond.

It was dark save for the stars and a few scattered and flickering oil lamps, and the whole adventure suddenly struck him with a sinister aspect as the newcomers came closing in on him. They were big, hulking brutes, evidently the scum of the lower bazaars—casteless carrion who lurked with the *bandicoots* in shadowy places, begging by day and robbing by night—hopeless pariahs whom any man might hire for a few rupees to do any dirty deed, cow-killing and murder not excepted.

Meredith was about equally divided between anger and astonishment. Surely they would never mean mischief to a European in the very middle of

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the town, almost within stone's throw of a big main thoroughfare! And then, while he still hesitated, gripping hard to his cane, the wooden lattice of a window set high in the wall of a house just beyond was rattled sharply, and a woman's voice came ringing and crying:

"Kabardar, Sahib! Budmash choar dekho! Kabar-dar, bonti hai!"

Even as the warning reached him and he started in response, a soft entangling cloth was flung deftly from behind and twisted tight. He struck out blindly, desperately with his stick, while through the muffled folds of the evil-smelling rag the woman's shrieks persisted faintly.

Almost as the cloth was thrown, the hindmost beggar flung himself like a cat and landed on the Doctor's back, twisting and pulling at the strangling cloth. Meredith realised his danger instantly, and, bracing himself before the strangle-hold had fairly gripped him, he reached back and caught the fellow's neck with both hands, and, with a sudden wrestler's trick that all schoolboys know, humped him head-long over his shoulders and tore the throttling rag away.

He called hoarsely for the police as he dashed out into the lane, struggling and smashing at the three men who kept rushing him. He was trying to get to the wall, and had nearly reached it, when he slipped and fell, and then the game seemed up, as

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the three men came running in on him. His stick and knuckles were broken and the sweat and blood were pouring freely from his body, while the lane was strewed with tattered rags that had been torn from the combatants in their raging fight. You may be sure they gave him no breathing spell, but rushed to finish their dirty work before he was fairly down.

Now, as fate saw fit, he fell at the lintel of a door, and even as he fell it yielded in with a jarring scrape. He rolled over on his back half into the open doorway, and as he did so something soft and white—a woman—sprang swiftly past him and met the rushing men.

She balanced herself, swaying astride of the fallen man like some slim young Amazon, her *sari* gathered and knotted about her loins and her brown limbs bared and nervous for the fray. In her hands she gripped a bulging linen bag, and as the leader came on she swung it full in his face, letting loose the string that held its mouth, deluging him in a cloud of pepper which filled his eyes and nose and mouth and caught the others stranglingly as they came panting up behind him. There was a hoarse scream of fright and pain from the leader—his hands went up to his eyes in sudden agony, and the girl caught the glint of starlight on the knife that lay bound along his wrist.

For a moment there was a terrible coughing and cursing and gasping for breath. The woman made

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a desperate effort to drag the door to, and Meredith was struggling to his knees to help her, when the man whom she had struck flung himself headforemost like a mad boar, right on top of them. The girl was dashed aside by the impact, and Meredith was borne backward, striking his head a nasty blow on the stone flooring, while his assailant, still cursing and bellowing with fury and pain, was tearing at his throat and striving to press the knife home.

But the girl was back at the fellow again, harrying him. She felt for his head, and gripping her firm young arm under his chin, forced it steadily back. He was unable to shake her off, and unable to use his knife, hampered by the rigid vice-like grip of the Doctor's arms and legs. And so they struggled and cursed and rolled in the black passageway, and slowly the beggar was choking the Doctor, and inch by inch the girl was forcing the beggar's head back, till at last she bore it down on the stones beneath her. She changed her hold then, and drew herself up till she could plant her naked knee on the fellow's throat, and after that her free hands went out gropingly to the strappings that held the knife in place.

Meantime, the men in the lane were dancing and cursing with their pain, though now and again pausing to listen how the fight was going on in the passage.

The door had been forced nearly shut in the

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struggle, barring their entrance even had they desired to join in; but they had enough to do coughing and sneezing and clearing their eyes, and were quite willing to let their comrade settle the matter in his own fashion. The man who had first attacked Meredith was sitting in the gutter moaning and trying to find out what had happened; and still the short snarling breaths and gasps, with now and then a smothered groan, were borne to them from out the dark doorway.

Of a sudden the man in the gutter raised his head in an attitude of attention, then scrambled hurriedly up with a low note of warning to the others, and went hopping away at a great pace, with his rags flapping around him.

The others paused a moment listening, and then there came the sound of voices and quick rushing footsteps. That was enough; and with a hoarse cry to the man in the passage, they darted away and were lost in the shadows whence they came.

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CHAPTER VII

THE pariah's murderous fingers, together with the loss of blood and a cracked skull, proved too much for the Doctor, and he collapsed while the girl was still struggling for the knife. Later he came to, slowly and unwillingly, with a high pulse and temperature. His eyes opened on his surroundings, strange as they were, with dull acquiescence; they seemed so intimately a part of the wild dreams which had been pursuing him that he accepted them as such without question. When his head or throat pained him he touched them curiously, but the bandages held no meaning for him.

He was lying on a dais raised barely a foot from the floor and supported by great glass balls or casters, while tiny lamps—mere floating wicks in coloured glasses—burned in what looked like a great pattern around his couch. There were bars of red and white streaking the floor, and at the foot of the couch, inside the pattern of lamps, an old man was crouched over a brazen pot that was set on a spirit lamp. Into this pot he was dropping powders and measured liquids, and now and again a scarlet

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flower plucked from a wreath that crowned his hoary head and hung about his neck. And ever the smoke of incense rose up from the pot and curled like a sinuous serpent around the man's body. He was nude save for the flowers, and gaunt, but nevertheless full of a certain dignity which was enhanced by his great white beard and his mystic occupation. Now and again he arose to his full stature and, taking the brazier by both handles, raised it high above his head and swayed it in slow half-circles, first this side, then that, muttering all the while *mantrams* [incantations] to Marana Devi, the Goddess of Death, and to Lakshimi, the Wise in Magic. Beside him on a tray stood a silver bowl of blood, and yet another of fresh-boiled rice, while innumerable other objects, curious and repellent, lay grouped around. There were *dharba* grasses and dried roots in profusion, cardamoms, a goodly pile of saffron, together with betel leaves and bones—human metacarpal and vertebral. And at intervals the man would crawl on his belly around the pattern doing *puja* [worship] to the lamps, whispering strange words to them and laying before them a little blood-stained rice, a betel leaf, or some of the grasses. Then again he would rise to his full height and call imperiously on some unpronounceable devil to guard the door or window, as the case might be.

These mysterious rites exercised a certain drowsy fascination over the sick man, and seemed the more

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weird as he would relapse now and again for a few minutes into a feverish doze; when the old chap seemed immediately to cut up the most monstrous capers, to say nothing of assuming astonishing forms. Now he was posed as a long-tailed lemur on top of the swinging *punka*, and at each passing swing he endeavoured to drop a powder in his, the Doctor's, eye; they never fell true, but his fear of them was just as great. And then the old heathen was a snake charmer, and together with a huge cobra, danced wild can-cans in and out and around the little lamps, while other smaller serpents sat on their tails outside and applauded vociferously.

So Meredith lay in the place of shadows in the house of Loda the Witch, and daily a skilled surgeon visited him and hospital *hamals* trotted back and forth; but always after these were gone the lamps were set and Baram Soodi, the *jadoo* maker, took charge of the case, and with wise *puja* to the gods and holy *mantrams* surrounded the sick man night and day lest greater evil should befall than had already.

And Loda passed in and out continually, bearing cooling drinks, curious febrifuges, herbs and potions that the English surgeon had no knowledge of, but which her patient swallowed with avidity. Sometimes when the fever ran high and the man struggled hard with the binding sheet that held him, Baram Soodi would call her, and she would stoop

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over Allan like a mother over a sick babe and place her hands on his bandaged head, tenderly and with care, and steady it; then she would breathe gently a moment on his forehead, betwixt the eyes, at the root of the nose. Three or four breaths were always enough, and then his tired eyes would fall away from hers and he would pass into a place of rest and ease.

Israel Ben Alif, the dwarf, had brought the Doctor to the house of his mistress in an unconscious condition; brought him, with much fear, in an improvised palanquin of sheets swung from the shoulders of four stout coolies. Loda received him seemingly as an expected guest, and applied such medication as she had knowledge of. She hastily summoned Yah Mahommed, and he, posing as an intimate friend of the Doctor's, notified the hospital authorities of the man's whereabouts and condition and satisfied them that as he was too ill to be moved he would receive the utmost care until well.

After these preliminaries were settled and the visiting surgeon had made Meredith as comfortable as possible, Loda turned her attention to her servant, Ben Alif.

So far she had not questioned him by word or look, devoting herself absolutely to the immediate care of the hurt man; but now she retired to her room and, ordering out her women, struck the bronze gong sharply.

Ben Alif entered slowly in response, and faced

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his mistress with evident reluctance. There was a crestfallen look about the man, and he licked his lips for all the world like a guilty dog. He loved his mistress—worshipped her with all his heart—and he feared her most of all.

She eyed him coldly as he stood genuflecting before her, then sharply bade him speak. And strangely enough for an Oriental, he spoke the truth fairly and to the point, though his story was to his discredit.

"Beloved of the Prophet, I, thy dog, thy slave, have sinned and am not worthy to serve thee. Thou didst send me to watch the goings out and comings in of this white Hakim, and I, Chand ki Beti, set a watch about the great hospital. Selim I set in the lane and Sher Ali at the Byculla gate, while I watched in the shadow of the dispensary wall. So we waited the whole day till the sun was low, and we had fasted save for a little *pan supari*; and, Friend of the World, we were faint, and our tongues clung to our teeth for drought. And I called Selim and told him I would cross to the opposite side for awhile and eat a little at the shop of Said the Strong, and when I returned I would keep his watch also, that he might eat. I did but taste a little curry and *dhall*, and smoke a *birri* and—perhaps——" He faltered and looked supplicatingly at her as he added, "and perhaps a single cup of *shraub*."

Ben Alif paused, waiting for her comment. He

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was crouched at her feet, and would have kissed her sandal had he dared. But her face was cold and set and she ignored his humility, merely ordering him to "get to his tale."

"I was away but a short half-hour, O Shining One, and when I came back Selim was gone and Sher Ali knew nothing. I found Selim later, drinking and smoking with the barber Jhan, and dragged him forth. Then, to make sure of no harm, I ran and spoke to the *hamal*, that I had business and would see the Sahib. And he took my message and brought me word that the Sahib was just gone forth.

"And then we ran this way and that, like lost dogs, but could find no scent till a girl, a *birri-wallah*, called to Sher Ali, whose friend she was, and questioned him what he sought. And when he told her, she said quickly: 'Ah, he was here; was there any harm?'

" 'Nay, I know not; but there may be,' Sher Ali answered. 'Why dost thou ask, and whither went he?' But the girl smote her breast and cried out: '*Ahie!* What have I done? I have betrayed him! Oh, Ali, what shall I do? What shall I do?'

"But Ali called for me, and I caught her roughly and bade her speak quick and tell what she knew.

"She said that the Sahib, whom she knew from his having doctored her brother in the dispensary, had stopped to light his cigar, and when he had

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gone, a lame pariah called Aguf the Red came from the shadows and asked if that was the Hakim Sahib. She was afraid of the man and had told him yes, and then had begun to doubt the wisdom of telling him, for, when he heard it, he had darted limping away up a side-street by which he might intercept the Sahib if such were his intention.

"And so while she was still in doubt, for she suspected Aguf's calling, Sher Ali came running through—and that was all we could get save that the chase had passed, ten good minutes gone.

"We ran, Light of the Stars, up this way and down that, till we heard the voice of a woman crying, and then we had to make our way round to the place. And when we came there we found a naked girl, a *bayadere* from one of the temples, striving with a *choar* in a passageway. But the Hakim Sahib was lying still.

"This girl struck the pariah Son of Sheitan with a knife, even before these hands could reach him; and for me, Wise One, there was nothing left save to bring the wounded here quickly."

"And this pariah and the girl?" asked Loda.

"The police, Wisdom, came in time to take the carrion to the hospital, but the girl even fled with me and is in hiding with thy women."

"And the Sahib, thou dog, if he dies, dost know what will befall thee?"

She leaned forward and glowered at him and he

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drooped lower and still lower at her feet, but answered her never a word.

"So, for a little *shraub*," she went on pitilessly, "thou wouldst risk my wrath—make me a byword with thy gutter friends. Thou fool! Thou *mut-wallah!* Thou crooked thing of evil! Dost thou think I will withhold my hand for thy cringing there? Nay, thou unclean dog, I will scourge thee like the hound thou art—and then thou shalt drink of the Omar of Dreams."

She sprang to her feet even as the dwarf caught her ankles, pressing his forehead to her sandals in a paroxysm of terror and begging for mercy. But his touch seemed to inflame her anger yet the more. She wrenched her foot from his grasp and, forcing him back, set her sandal on his brawny neck, and unclasping a heavy silver girdle, she drew back her arm to strike. Alif flung an arm across his eyes as he heard the hiss of the falling lash, and his flesh shrank curdling from its bite. The girdle barely touched him, just trailed across his naked flesh, but at each stroke she leaned her weight on the foot that pressed his throat, though in all there was barely force enough to hurt a child; yet this man's flesh quivered and the sweat poured freely forth, while he heaved and groaned in agony and would have sworn he sweated blood.

In a while she stayed her hand and the man lay a shrunken, shivering heap, believing firmly that

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he had been fairly cut to ribbons. While he lay groaning, the girl opened a little cabinet and poured some liquid from a graven flask into a little cup, and, having added water, she bade him come and take it.

The poor fellow crawled across the rugs and took the cup with palsied hand. He looked at her once imploringly, but her face was set like a scornful fate, so he steadied the cup between his chattering teeth and swallowed the contents.

He drank it kneeling and dropped the cup with a clatter. As his head fell forward the girl smiled a little scornfully, then with a touch of pity she put her hand under the heavy chin, muttering: "*Ahie*, poor Alif! Thou makest thine own tortures, verily."

She watched him a moment and then made a sudden movement with her wrist, at the jointure of her hand, a twisting pressure on his forehead; then:

"Israel Ben Alif, awake! Awake, I say, and forget not thy terrible dreams."

He woke suddenly and with confusion and began to tremble afresh, gaping around with wondering fear, till Loda spoke again and told him his penance was done. On catching the kindlier note in her voice, his trouble was forgot and he fawned on her like a clumsy hound, catching the hem of her robe and pressing his lips to the sandals that had spurned him so harshly.

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And of all the men who had come and gone in her life, there was none whose love could compare with that of her slave, Ben Israel Ben Alif, that night.

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CHAPTER VIII

MAHOMMED looked up from his pillows when Loda drew back the curtain. The room was glowing with soft lamplight that seemed to centre its rosy radiance about the strong white head of the old man.

"Well, child, what news?" he asked in a deep, musical voice. "Nay, come and sit beside me here, where the wind plays from thy *punkas* like a breath from the Prophet's garden. So, my rose, where hast thou been this hour past?"

"Ah, my lord," she answered, laughing, "thy rose has been flaying a fool, and she is a-wearied."

"Ah, and who is the culprit?"

"Oh, Ben Alif, my lord, thy wild man from the hills; he is as strong as Siva's bull, and yet I can move him easier far than Bodi Bai, my little Cashmere slave. Why, my lord, I vow I did naught but tickle this great fellow's ribs with my girdle, and the sweat broke from him in streams, and then I tricked him with a little sweetened lemon salts and areca. He drank it as the Omar of Dreams, and verily, my lord, if thou hadst seen him twitch and groan thou wouldst not doubt the dreams.

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Ahie, my lord, what fools men be—all alike, as poor Alif—with boundless faith in evil, and naught but a great distrust of good."

"And women, child, are they so wise?" questioned Mahommed, with a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

"Not 'so wise,' my lord; but wise enough to take the sweet and let the bitter go—at least where they are young and unspoiled by men. See, my lord, little Bodi Bai was pettish—I know not why; some cobra crawling over her spirit path, perchance, and then again perhaps a little touch of common bile. Be it any way, she angered me with sulky mien and careless service, and I, to punish her, gave her to drink of my Omar of Dreams.

"I prepared it with much mystery before her eyes, and they grew round with wonder. I wove my spells over the baby craftily and with skill; I told her to sleep and dream. And, my lord, she drank the cup and composed her dainty little face as if for sleep—but I saw her lips suck in a little to get the lingering sweetness of the lemon and then her eyelids quivered and I caught her up and shook her. And she laughed and laughed as though it were some new game of play; then, when she saw my serious face, she knelt down and kissed the edge of my robe, but she was all bubbling over despite her humility. By and by she said more soberly, '*Ahie*, Wisdom Beebi, I was afraid at first, but I

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tasted the sugar and lemon and I knew that thou didst love thy Bodi Bai.'

"That was all, my lord; she tasted the sugar and remembered my love, and for the rest—the bogies, my spells, and my sorcery—she swept them aside as though they were not."

Mahommed chuckled, and then in a grave tone said: "Ah, Loda, if all the world were as wise as thy Bodi Bai, life would scarce be worth the having. But Allah is wise, and hath made the fool to increase and multiply, that thou and I, child, may prosper in the way we go. But what of thy Shadow, Loda?"

"He is mending, my lord; but beyond that, I confess I am at a loss. My skill is set back and I have to employ this old *jadoo* maker to offset the evil I can feel but not understand. *Ahie!* I fear my wisdom is but foolishness. I am in the dark. Why this attack, and what does it mean? And alas! my lord, I am outside even of thy counsel in this matter, and thy heart is shut against my foolishness."

"Nay, child, now thou art indeed foolish and dost refute thine own philosophy. I purposely sent Baram Soodi to thee in order that thou shouldst not waste thy force on this lower plane when I need thy aid in larger matters. Let Baram be; he will meet evil with evil and beat these Sons of Sheitan at their father's game; aye, and revel in the doing; whereas thou, child, wouldst suffer in so mean a

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fight, and would needs get the reek of hell on thee before thou couldst stamp out this devil's fire."

"But what is it, my lord; who has dared to strive against thee?"

"Nay, Loda, they do not strive against me—or, at least, know it not—but they have learned what I had hoped to keep secret a while longer—who this man truly is. Remember, Loda, if thou couldst find him, others might."

"But, truly, I do not understand; who is this man, my lord?"

"Thou hast no inkling, child?—no dream? Thy crystal does not speak?"

"Indeed, my lord, since five days now the crystal works strangely and is not dependable, and my dreams are foolish likewise. I have brought this man so far—I have touched his brain—and strange memories that I have not controlled have sprung to life. There is another man behind this cold Doctor, a man vague and shadowy, groping blindly after expression. And I, my lord, I fear this other! He seems to sweep my suggestions aside, and to be gaining force and power every moment as the Doctor loses it, and—and suppose, my lord, I lose control?"

"Nay; fear nothing! This coming man is the true Shadow, and it is he whom Baram is here to guard and Baram's foes have sworn to destroy. But I tell thee, child, fear nothing! Thou shalt gain

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complete dominion over this coming man. With this English doctor neither thou nor I have aught to do—he is a mere shell, a husk, a chrysalis! The man I want is—canst thou not guess the name?"

"Nay, my lord; I have not even a clue."

"Hast thou heard no whisper even of the coming of a mighty warrior—a messiah—one who shall break down the barriers of creeds and join the nations and the tribes against a common foe—an *avatar* of—some say of this foolish god, and some of that; but I say—of a Goorkha Prince! Now hast thou a clue?"

The girl stared at him with wide dilated eyes, as the magnitude of his plot began to take definite proportions in her brain, and she answered doubtfully and in a whisper, "Aye, my lord; it seems I have heard—but—but is not this coming *avatar* —this Goorkha—a Hindu of the Rajput line of kings? And thou, my lord——"

"Well, why didst thou not finish, child—'And thou, Yah Mahommed, one of the Faithful, what hast *thou* to do with this worshipper of foolish gods?' "

"But thou *art* a Mohammedan, my lord?"

"Thou sayest so, child."

"Nay, my lord, I did but ask."

"Well, Loda, I will answer. I am Yah Mahommed and I stand alone. And because I stand alone, Allah and the Prophet serve me—and also Brahma

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and Siva and Vishnu! Dost thou think I shall be the less a man because I change the flap of my coat from my left to my right breast? I tell thee, child, I have worn the Brahmin's triple cord; I learned the wisdom of the Atharva-Veda, and became a *guru*, and then passed out of lower limitations and learned to stand alone! To-day I am a Moslem because Allah serves me best; to-morrow, perchance, I shall have work for Marana Devi, and may resume my *guru* cloak and office. Behind my back, the English whisper 'Renegade,' but they bow themselves to the dust before my beard. They ask my advice here and intervention there, and they think they have played a skilful game with me by piling honours on me that I despise; but some day they will wake to their mistake, and the fools will know that Yah Mahommed has held them in derision! Verily, I will gather them up and crumple them in my naked hand, and their Bhagwan shall fail them utterly! There, child, thou art answered."

Still there was a puzzled frown on the girl's brow, and she sat gazing into the shadows, but she answered him never a word. Much of the attitude of this man toward the gods she herself held: she could hardly have helped it with such a teacher and with such a heredity as was hers; yet something hurt her in her master's callous disregard of certain subtle ideals that still found nurture in her sentient womanhood. She had come under his sway

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at an early age, when his very selfishness had appealed to her as strength; but now, on occasion, his arrogance jarred on her sensibilities. This cold-blooded ability to use all things—even what seemed to her still sacred—for the furtherance of his ambitions was utterly beyond her comprehension. She wondered sometimes vaguely if she were not herself a mere pawn, to be moved thus and so in his plan of battle, rather than that "heart's desire" of which he spoke so often and which stirred and troubled some deeps that thus far she had not been able to fathom.

Mahommed watched her keenly, shrewdly, from under his heavy brows, and he read her thoughts like an open book. He laid a gentle hand on her knee, and all the arrogance was gone from his voice as he asked with a little reproach:

"And thou, Loda, what is thy faith, and who thy people? Are we not both wanderers—children of destiny? Dost *thou* serve Allah, or Isis, or Jehovah, or Brahma? Think, child, before thou judgest me!"

She turned to him swiftly: "Forgive me, my lord; I told thee I was foolish and unworthy thy confidence. Who am I that I should question thy ways? Behold, I have no gods or kith or kin save thee! Let me follow thee, my lord, when thou goest hence; and thy people shall be my people, and thy gods my gods."

She knelt on the cushions at his side and rested

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her arms on his knees, full of quick contrition for her hard thoughts. After all, since her early childhood she had been cared for and comforted by this old man. When her parents had been swept away by a plague in Cairo and she was utterly alone and helpless, his agents had watched over her, and now, to-day, he stood between her and the whole world. So she repented quickly, and bowed herself humbly and tenderly before him.

"Forgive me, my lord."

"Wilt thou truly leave all this and follow me, child?"

"Try me, my lord."

"Even into danger?"

"There most of all, my lord."

"Aye, even so; I can read thy heart, child; I know thee well. And why should I not—for verily I have made thee mostly what thou art, and thou art very good.

"And the time has come when thou shouldst see clearly the way by which we go, and the part that thou and I and this Shadow Thing shall play, so that thou mayest be prepared. For by the token of this attack upon thy sick guest, our way will not be undisputed.

"First see thy sick one, as I do not want to be disturbed again till thou hast clearly understood the matter. And, Loda, see to it that thy women are safe in their rooms, and let Ben Alif guard the

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farther door. Then bid old Soodi work his spells about the place so that false whispers shall carry to them that wait."

Loda left the room quickly on her errands. When she had gone, Mahommed rose and laid aside his pipe and, crossing to the east, drew back the curtains that hid the great crystal.

He stood gazing thoughtfully past the huge cobras into the evasive depths of the glass. He had known that glass more years than he could recall. It had come from a Hindu Rajah's treasure-house when the Moslem had swept the land. Mahommed had whispered a word in the Rajah's ear—a timely word that had saved his queens and himself alive—and the king in return had whispered back of the crystal, and its properties, and where it lay hid. So when Mahound swept down there was an empty dove-cot, and the treasure-house, too, lay spoiled. *He* had heard of the crystal by repute, and also of rare jewels whose virtues were marvellous beyond belief, and of others whose potencies for evil had been held unquestioned for a thousand years; and now these things for which he had come were gone. He had sent his fastest troop of horse on a wild chase after the flying Rajah, but the Rajah had gained the foothills, and was soon laughing at the pursuit.

How Yah Mahommed had got his spoil safely away he alone knows; but one thing is sure, that

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much of it found its way back to its rightful owner's hands, and aided him materially when he in turn swept down into the peaceful valley that lies at the foot of Chundragiri, and there conquered the principality of his deified patron, the saintly Ne. And this kingdom of Nepaul throve apace. But as it had sprung into being out of a time of blood, so it continued and is to this very day subject to baptisms of horror—where fire and sword make bloody holocausts; a hotbed of evil, cursed by priest and sword; where the toy government rules as long as it may by might, and then goes out in blood and smoke.

Mahommed stood now in the little alcove with the curtains dropped behind him, gazing into the glass, but with his thoughts far away in beautiful Nepaul where also his own hope lay. The crystal was pulsing slowly, growing opaque and milky, and then clearing till you could see right through to its centre. And while the old man stood thus abstractedly, the glass grew suddenly troubled and a little globule of light shot up, and again, after a moment, another.

Of the first Mahommed seemed barely conscious, but the second brought him to an attitude of quick attention. He leaned forward with flashing eyes, waiting, watching. The crystal was working; there was a message in the air! With his eyes still fixed on that little troubled nimbus, he raised his arms slowly, and their majestic sweep as he moved them

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"With his eyes still fixed on that little troubled nimbus,
he raised his arms slowly . . . "

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in curious mystic figures seemed to clear the pathway of Fate and bid her hurry on.

And then suddenly a third globule rose up through the glass and burst into a brilliant light that made the crystal glow and sparkle like a living thing.

Mahommed's arms now paused motionless, uplifted toward the East, and his voice broke out in a hoarse whisper:

"Is it thou, Zebrastar?"

And when he had spoken his arms dropped to his side and his whole face and figure became relaxed in expectant attention as he waited the answer. He stood so for perhaps half a minute, motionless in the shadow, his garments looming ghostly fantastic from the crystal's phosphorescent light. And then there went a sudden shiver through the tapestries—*as though a wind had lifted them*—and a whisper fell low but distinct:

"It is I."

Then quickly Mahommed questioned, "Where art thou, Zebrastar?"

"In the Perwan Temple, Pashupati," came the rustling whisper, and then: "Beware! Thy foes rejoice! I—I—— Quick! The current is breaking! Watch the crystal!"

And again came a sudden draught that lifted the curtains and sucked them in and then let them fall heavy and motionless.

Mahommed leaned forward and watched the glass

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eagerly as it fogged and cleared, and in a little while something took shape, faint and thin at first, but gaining in density as innumerable particles of light sped to its upbuilding. A long, pregnant "Ah—h!" escaped the man's lips, and his brown fingers clenched savagely in his white drapery as he gazed on the completed whole. *It was the yellow pearl-rimmed moonstone*—even the one over which Meredith had puzzled so long and fruitlessly!

It remained intact barely an instant, and then a shadow, suggestive of some great hand, closed over it; there was a boiling confusion of light and colours, heaving and struggling and swirling, and then the opaque milky fog once more.

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CHAPTER IX

MAHOMMED stood frowning at the crystal long after the vision had passed; he seemed quite nonplussed by what he had seen and heard. Later he raised the curtain and passed from the alcove to the outer room. Loda had not yet returned, and he straightway caught up the gong-stick and struck the bronze disk sharply.

"Tell your mistress I desire to see her urgently, Ben Alif," he ordered as the dwarf appeared in the doorway; and then he fell to pacing the floor till Loda should come.

She gazed anxiously at him as she entered; it was so unusual for him to show any sign of haste. She saw his perplexed, frowning face and cried out immediately.

"What is it, my lord; what is wrong?"

"Nothing much, child—I trust; but tell me, what didst thou with the yellow moon, that curious Rajput toy?"

"Why, my lord, I sent it to this man. Surely thou dost remember our discussing the matter!"

"Yes, yes; but I wanted to be sure. It was, I fear, a mistake It gives a double reason for this

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attack, which may have been partly successful, after all. There was no sign of this thing on his person when Ben Alif brought him in?"

"Surely no, my lord. Oh, I understand; you—you think he was carrying it here when he was waylaid—of course! I should have known. Is it vital, my lord? Ah, I knew—— See, my lord, we have had the evil chances in this matter since its first inception——"

And then she stopped before the imperious gesture of the man. It was useless to say more, so she paused a little falteringly and sat down among the cushions, watching him as he paced restlessly up and down.

By and by he stopped before her; then, seating himself, he lifted a hot coal from the brazier and set it in his pipe, and for some minutes there was no sound save the deep, low-breathed gurgle of the water in the bowl. Later he began to speak, slowly at first and between long, smoky exhalations, but soon with a rising cadence of passion, and the tube of the hubble-bubble was flung aside; his keen gray eyes flashed, his nostrils expanded, and a palpable magnetic ether seemed to dart out from him toward the girl.

"I tell thee, Loda, these mischances are but the precursors of victory! Besides, it is too late to draw back now. You do not realise, child, what is at stake! Ten thousand picked fighters are quivering

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at the leash; aye, and a hundred thousand more are hanging on the sky-line sniffing the coming fight like hungry buzzards. Pariah clans are gathering here and there and everywhere; the bazaars are quick with their going and coming; mysterious priests are whispering among them and marking their breasts with a bloody moon! And in all the land, Loda, but thou and I and Zebrastar, the high priest in Holy Pashupati, understand the true meaning of these things. No, no! The die is cast! The word is rustling over all the land, and even now the patter of naked feet is answering swiftly from the great northeast, and—come closer, child, while I whisper —up at Girza-il-Kab there are ten thousand stacks of Martini rifles, with the pick of my Brahnis to sight them! Ah, child, have a little more faith; trust thy destiny and mine. Why, but a few short moments since and thou wast preaching a fair enough philosophy! Whence this change?"

"My lord, it is not for myself, but for thee. If there be this mighty preparation, it must be for a worthy foe, and, indeed, so far—— Well, there, I will not grieve thee more; so, have no fear. I pledge thee my word I will not be a prophet of evil to thee ever again: I will hold thee fast in the spirit of strength and victory. And now, my lord, if thou dost need me in thy council, I am with thee, body and brain."

"Then all is well! And I do surely need thee—

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thy council, thy wisdom—for the foe indeed is worthy! Listen and judge.

"When Irkhana Singh fled before the Moslem I aided his flight, for the man and I were as brothers. Later I foiled Mahound the Mighty so he found but a spoiled treasure-house and an empty *zennana*, while the city of Irkhana the Magnificent was naught but a smouldering ruin of hot ashes.

"Now, when Irkhana in turn swept over the Moon Mountain [Chundragiri], I, Yah Mahommed, led the way; and together we conquered the kingdom which is called Nepaul. It was a hard fight, with three great cities to overcome—Khatmandu, Patan, and later, Bhatgaon. And mark you, Loda, all this was done by the aid of the strong hand of his friend and brother, Yah Mahommed, who, besides restoring freely the treasure he had saved from the Moslem raid, led his hereditary tribes out against the Hillsmen who would have disputed Irkhana's way, and drove them back to their fastnesses while the new lord devoted himself to the conquest of the valley.

"This kingdom was small and weak in its beginnings, but was shut in by mighty snow-topped hills, and was belted about by a jungle so dense and dank and trackless that none might pass without running a desperate gauntlet; for the place was quick with hungry tigers and serpents and great elephants, and if a man escaped the beasts and the serpents

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there were swamps still more deadly that belched forth fever and death, so that even to this day the Terai is practically impregnable—totally so in summer, and in winter only traversed on most urgent business.

"So you can see that, if Irkhana was lonely, he was at least fairly secure, as his grandson proved when the English tried to oust him from his little garden. In fact, on its outer boundaries this independent little kingdom is invulnerable to both India and Tibet—or would be with the use of a little more brains and money than the present rulers have to expend—but inside, the hills themselves are alive from the snow to the foothills with countless tribes of hardy fighting men headed by turbulent princes who fear neither Allah nor the King of Nepaul, and who are at present held in check, not so much by the standing army in Khatmandu, as by the numberless bounties they enjoy from the government and by their own lack of ability to organise.

"When Irkhana was settled in his new capital, he aided me to build Girza-il-Kab, my house in the hills. I built it with cunning and much care, fortified it with *sangars* and girded it about with mighty rocks, till to-day, with food enough, I would defy the armies of the world to fetch me out! And being generous, Irkhana presented to me a flower from his *zennana*, a Cashmere girl of great beauty and wit;

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and on a certain day, my house being finished, I sent an escort to bring her home in state to be my bride.

"Now, there was a man in the hills, a Raj-bhat Prince, a wild fellow to whom the tribesmen looked up as in some sort a little deity, and toward whom, on account of his large influence, Irkhana had been most conciliatory. This man, Rama Lalkura, had seen the girl at the palace, where he had often been entertained, and coveted her. Instead of speaking out, for she was but a slave, he waited till she was promised to me, and later, as my escort was bringing her home to Girza-il-Kab, he broke on it like a sudden hail-storm with a host of his hillsmen and, sweeping my guards off the hillside, made off with the girl.

"I reported the thing to the Rajah, who was thunderstruck at the fellow's audacity, and he sent a courier in hot haste demanding the immediate surrender of the girl. Two days later the man returned and told his master that Prince Rama Lalkura had hoisted his standard in a rocky defile above the city, and that the lesser leaders with their clans were flocking to him hourly; that even as he left they were more numerous than the trees; that runners were out rousing the tribes a hundred miles away; and he said that the answer of the Prince to the King's message had been thus: 'This is not thy quarrel, my Lord Irkhana—unless thou makest it

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so—but that of a Mussulman hound, whom I, Prince Rama Lalkura, have despoiled and whom I now defy; but, my lord, if thou dost desire to take the matter up for thy friend, the girl is here at Bhaitypore, where I will gladly give him welcome who dares to claim her, be he Moslem or Hindu or both!'

"That night, Loda, the King had his choice between his friend and brother—and peace. He chose peace, and I swore then that if it took ten thousand years I would wipe out his share in the kingdom I had helped to build. I sent a runner to Rama Lalkura telling him what I had done, and saying that he was free of the girl—that he might dismiss his men, as I was neither his friend nor foe, but to beware the King who chose ingratitude to danger.

"Now, Irkhana was worse than a coward in this matter—he was a fool; for I could have put a thousand Brahnis—the pick of a fighting race—against this Raj-bhat Prince, and with the King's army we would have won. But as it was, he lost my support and gained nothing in return. Prince Rama Lalkura grew turbulent and demanded more and more month by month, till verily the children of the valley were in doubt as to who was their legitimate ruler, and it seemed in truth that the time was to hand when Rama Lalkura would be lord indeed and Irkhana be reduced to the position of a tributary Prince, if even that semblance of power

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were left him. But at the moment of his greatest promise Lalkura fell.

"There are many versions of the manner of his taking off, and they only coincide in this one particular—that it was a bloody one. The most popular tradition is that the secret way of his rock-bound fort was betrayed to Irkhana, who hired a band of desperadoes from among the criminal element that was always seeking either refuge or plunder in the little principality, and that these crept past the guards in the night and broke in on the Prince while he was still abed. Now the Prince had always lived in dread of treason, and nightly he shut himself in the house with the girl he had stolen and her women, with the guard posted outside. It seems he had provided a secret way, a passage from the anteroom of his bedchamber, by which he could escape down through the very bowels of the mountain and into a temple of Siva, the passage ending in the hollow belly of the god himself. Whether this be true, and the priest who kept the shrine was the traitor, or some temple girl, a *deva-dasi* who had discovered the secret of the shrine, can never be known. It seems most probable, however, that a rush was made on the outside—a diversion, as it were, to hide the real attack from the secret way. The thing was well planned and even the elements favoured it, for there was a terrific storm of wind and water raging the livelong night, and many of the guards

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had crept away from their posts. Probably it is true that Rama Lalkura, the Hope of the Hills, and the girl, were both cut down directly, no real defense being possible, though the wonder-mongers up there sing of a mighty fight where the woman slew a score of men in defense of her dying lover. That any such thing happened is hardly likely, for these matters are usually managed in a more businesslike way than that.

"A year after this little game was finished and Irkhana was beginning to feel safe and strong in the land, a whisper grew in the hills that at a certain time Prince Rama Lalkura would come again—that his murdered spirit had come to a holy Yogi in a little hill temple and bade him tell his people that he would surely come and set them free; for them to hold their independence and wait till he gathered power for a mighty *avatar*, when he would come as a messiah, a deliverer who would lead them out to the conquest, first of their own valley and then of the whole world.

"Of course, at first this seems a very crude trick of the enemies of Irkhana to hold the people and the hills against him, and so it appealed to me till I saw later by the stars that some such *avatar* was indeed promised. It seemed preposterous, but the stars do not lie; so I set myself to study the matter. Years passed. Irkhana was slain in the first revolution, and in the second his son was placed on the

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throne. Through all this time I gained no clue to the true meaning of the whisper which had now grown to a belief, a faith; and Rama Lalkura had come to be the hope and the watchword of a thousand warrior tribes. Then the truth came to me.

"I had bought a young slave girl in Peshawar, and the dealer, an Iranie, whispered that she had come from far Nepaul. I professed skepticism, and he showed me some papers written in Parbatiya as I saw at a glance. He also produced the yellow crystal of which we have just been robbed. I bought these along with a few other trifles which the fellow stated had been left with him when the little slave-girl's mother had died on his hands a few months before. To be brief, I found in these papers what I should have thought of long before—that Rama Lalkura had left a son, and that son had escaped—been smuggled away as the child of one of the slave women, all of whom were spirited away on the night of the tragedy.

"The little girl not only corroborated the papers, but also told me that the lost baby bore a birth-mark which was hereditary in the family of Rama Lalkura, and that the pearl-rimmed crystal was the symbolic decoration of his house.

"With much difficulty, and after a long period of time, I traced the child into Tibet, and then lost him again for a number of years, but finally came in touch with him in Persia, where he had

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settled and prospered. Thou dost wonder why I took such interest, such trouble? Well, I had come slowly to believe that this man Rama Lalkura was he of whom we have spoken, our Shadow, whom, as I have told thee, I sent to Yamma in the long ago, but whom Fate had set on earth once more to cross our paths again, thine and mine, Loda. Dost thou understand?"

"You mean, my lord, that I—I——" The girl stammered, gazing at him with great wide eyes and waited for him to finish.

"Yes, Loda; thou wast the Cashmere girl, my bride that was to be."

"But—but—— Oh, I don't understand! How can I? Why! if I was that woman, then the child—the baby—must have been mine."

"Naturally."

"Then this other one, this doctor, thou canst not mean——"

"Yes; there is never a doubt that he is the lineal descendant of that child."

"Then, my lord—my lord, this man is of my own blood!"

"Thy blood, child! Paf! Art thou a Hindu? Nay, thou art daughter of Issail Buraddy and his wife Fatima, Egyptians of the house of Edar of the tribe of Maneka. So, how sayest thou, 'This man—this Englishman—is of my own blood'?

"The tale that I have told thee is an old, old

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legend. Irkhana Singh and Rama Lalkura lived and fought and died near two centuries since, and yet to-day this old story of the coming *avatar*—for Rama Lalkura has been deified by his followers—is stronger and more sure of fulfilment than in all the years it has been a-building.

"Lalkura's son, who settled in Persia and was called Bemar Meerdit, developed the beginning of the scientific strain which, when later allied to English blood, produced a line of doctors whose name of 'Meerdit' was soon lost in the English 'Meredith.' And of this family there remains now but one who has not gone hence—even he of whom we have spoken, the only living descendant of this Lalkura—our Shadow."

"And thou and I, my lord?" questioned the girl doubtfully.

"Thou, child, hast been behind the veil and come again twice since those days of trouble."

"And thou, my lord?" she persisted

"I—well, I have learned to live, Loda—not perfectly yet, else would I not now need this Shadow Thing of thine, but—see, I have learned that the amount of wick burned depends on the quality and supply of the oil. Fools burn the wick, and as it cannot be replaced, they must needs get a new lamp; wise men burn the oil and save the wick—that is all, Loda."

"Surely, my lord, thy wisdom is greater than that

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of any other son of woman!" the girl exclaimed impetuously.

"Ah, child, if I thought so it would indeed show how little I really knew. What am I, after all, but an old man. I have used my thread of wick with skill and care, but it is nearly done. I might go hence and buy a new lamp, but I am weary of new lamps; they have an odour and are apt to smoke, and besides being expensive they are unreliable. I know what I am now, and what I know—what my possibilities and what my limitations, but if I go hence and seek to come again, who can say whether I shall find conditions that I may mould to my present desires? Nay, I will not go; and if I may not buy a new wick, verily I will take one—and who shall call me to any accounting?

"Now thou dost understand better the part thou shalt assign this doctor-man. We know that the blood of that old Raj-bhat Prince, Rama Lalkura, has cropped up in him after the curious ways of heredity. We know this by the 'Mark.' And where the blood is, there, also, is the spirit—and where the spirit is, thou, Loda, canst work. Twice has this so-called *avatar* been expected, prophesied concerning—and postponed. Curiously enough, each of these times has corresponded with the life of one of Bemar Meerdit's descendants whose body bore the 'Mark' but whose conditions were such that the Hindu spirit could not overcome them and force an

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expression—which proves what I say of the folly of going out when it is in any way possible to stay in, though it be under the most adverse conditions. For even to-day I am quite sure the Oriental would never have been able to break through the shell which time, environment and ages of education have built up around this cold English doctor without the adventitious aid of thy somnambulistic spells."

"And when does this *avatar* take place, my lord?" asked the girl after a few minutes of silence, during which Mahommed relighted his hookah and sat gravely smoking.

"During the next pilgrimage to Holy Pashupati, in February."

"It seems incredible that he will be there, my lord."

"*Tlcl* child, I have more faith in thy spells than thou hast thyself. Have no fear. The stars have spoken, and I know surely that between this and the time of pilgrimage thou wilt have worked the desired change."

. . . . . .

That night Loda woke from a dreamless slumber and gazed about the shadowy room wondering what had waked her. As she lay she became conscious of a depression of spirit—a sadness—which grew on her till she sought to trace its source, and found it in Mahommed's skilfully woven story. She did not

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for a moment doubt its exact truth, and during the telling his plan of vengeance had seemed just, almost poetic. But now her thoughts went out to the Raj-bhat; to the man who had loved her and held her despite Mahommed and Irkhana—aye, despite herself. Her thoughts were not resentful—it was night and her mood subjective; but they clung about him like bees, questioning, pitying, perhaps extenuating, for the man had loved her. Then she grew distraught—almost afraid—for it seemed to her that this Shadow Thing was near her—appealing to her by a sacred right of blood against a cruel wrong. It might have been a recurrence of the doubt Mahommed had striven to clear away, but it fell on the darkness in a sorrowful whisper: "If the blood of him who loved thee, why not *thy* blood, whose son he was equally?"

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CHAPTER X

THE silver chime had just struck the half-hour after midnight. Loda stood in the room where Meredith lay, looking down on him curiously. All the strange lamps were gone, also the old *jadoo* maker. Two days before this the attending surgeon had pronounced his patient convalescent, yet he lay there now as helpless and inert as on the night when he had been brought in unconscious from his fight in the bazaar. On a table near by lay an Oriental dress, simple but refined, the little breast-coat and *puggaree* showing only such signs of elegance and richness as might be becoming the station of a well-to-do Hindu gentleman.

Loda looked around the room critically and then crossed the rug-strewn floor, and drawing back a curtain, disclosed another and smaller chamber. This was but little more than a sunken marble basin, which was even then filling with water from numerous small silver star-shaped orifices in the bottom and sides. The broad edge was banked at the sides with fronded palms and rhododendrons, their dark-green leaves showing vividly against the

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white marble, and at the farther end was a broad low divan beside which stood a gem-crusted narghyle, with its charge of tobacco, aromatic herbs and honey, ready to hand.

Seeing that all was as she would have it, the girl drew back into the outer room, leaving the curtains open so that the tinkle of the falling water broke the silence musically.

On the wall at the farther end of the room was a curious silver disk marked round with the signs of the zodiac and set with a slender golden hand which vibrated continually in the sign in which it held. It was, in fact, a beautifully chased zodiacal clock, probably from Bagdad, where such toys are fairly common. The girl examined this critically for a few moments, and then returned to the side of the couch and gazed again at the man lying there, with a puckered brow. She had had him in her keeping for ten days and, sleeping and waking, had weaved her magic about him continually. Never within her memory had she striven for any one thing as she had for the conquest of this man; yet to-night she felt helpless. Perhaps it was that she had used all her force, every wizardry she knew, and had nothing left—no reserve to fall back on in case of failure. There had been something about this man from the first that had perplexed her, for he not only came readily under her influence and followed her suggestions, but went further—carried out those

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suggestions to ends she had in no way contemplated! She had heard of his adventure with the sweetmeat man—in fact, it was common gossip in the bazaar, of the strange Sahib who quoted from the "Vedas" and the "Bhagavata," in Parbatiya—but she had been far from desiring any such publicity as he had attracted. She had suggested the Oriental phase by the advice of Mahommed, and fostered it by her spells, but was quite unprepared for the avidity with which the suggestions were received, until the old man's story enlightened her to the possibility that there was another side to this cold doctor-man—a subjective side, that was eagerly seeking expression and profiting by her domination of the objective.

While she stood watching him the golden hand of the disk back of her slid from the House of Libra into that of Scorpio, and she realised that the hour for the crucial test had come.

Drawing back her flowing sleeves and stooping beside him, she placed the ends of her fingers on his forehead, just above the base of his nose. Then for a few moments she made a circular vibratory motion, her own eyes shut tightly and her breath coming and going with a long-drawn sibilant intonation.

The gold hand slurred at its first warning in Scorpio, and the girl rose up and spoke in a low, impressive voice, gazing meanwhile fixedly between the Doctor's eyes:

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"When the hand holds fast in Scorpio—the House of thy power—thou wilt awake, O Rama Lalkura, and remember all the lessons I have taught thee—and for the time forget all else. Thou wilt live thy true life—until the dawn—and then rest again, till once more my voice awakens thee. Remember! When the hand holds, awake!"

After she left the room the silence was but faintly broken by the tinkling of the distant water and the restless slurring of the golden hand, still influenced by the House of Libra which it had left, but every moment drawing farther into Scorpio.

Five minutes—ten—a quarter of an hour—and then there came a tiny silver chime and a sharp short click from the silver disk. The hour of Scorpio had arrived!

The man on the couch lay still a couple of seconds longer. Then there was a sudden start, as of a sleeper who has overslept, and the brown arms flung out convulsively, while the man's whole body writhed as though in sudden torture. He grasped the pillows savagely, then sprang to the floor, the linen coverings falling in disorder about him, and he stood there like some wild thing at bay, staring wide and clutching nervously at the sheets that had dragged with him from the bed. By and by he let them drop and began to feel his body curiously, touching his chest, his arms, his thighs, pinching

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them ever with a sort of awed wonder. And then a low cry burst from his lips, "At last!"

His arms went out and up in an excess of emotion, while his body shivered like a man struck suddenly with a palsy. But in a moment he controlled himself and sat on the edge of the couch frowning and muttering in a low whisper, with now and again a quick glance of mingled curiosity and fear. Next the tinkling of the water attracted him and he started up, but on his way caught sight of the clothes lying on the table. He lifted the white linen *dhotee* curiously, then nodded, and passed on through the curtain to the bath. Inside he paused irresolute a moment; then, raising his hands and eyes toward the lighted dome, he whispered hoarsely: "Forgive me, Brother. It was fated to be, but forgive me. I will give thee back thine own, I swear it—thy body and place and name intact, unhurt. Brother, I swear it. And thou—lo, thou art weary. Rest thee, Brother, for a little time, till I fulfil my destiny."

He flung away his sleeping-robe and stepped down into the cool scented water, laving his body and giving great contented sighs. Every moment now he seemed to grow and expand; the startled look was gone from his eyes and they were bright and flashing; his movements lost their nervousness and grew more and more determined. As he rubbed down with big Turkish towels, his fingers touched

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the birthmark on his chest; a thrill went through him and he fairly leaped toward the mirror that was set in the marble wall. He examined the mark closely for a moment, then out went his arms once more in the gesture that seemed to come so easily to him, and there was a dominant, exultant note in his voice as he cried again:

"At last—at last. After many years!"

He had brought the clothes to the lintel of the room and now proceeded to robe himself, deftly and with never a falter—even the *puggaree* arranged itself easily into graceful folds, though it is a fact that Doctor Meredith had never even seen one tied, let alone having done it himself, and it is far from an easy matter to the uninitiated.

Then came a lazy rest on the divan and long whiffs of smoke from the hookah, the *chillum* in the pipe mixing pleasantly with the suggestion of incense that hung about the place. Later, he passed back into the outer room and wandered to and fro examining his surroundings with keen interest. Now and again he would handle some article curiously, as though unfamiliar with it, and these, too, the more apparently commonplace. A modern German guitar, for instance, came in for a most thorough and interested examination, while a wonderful old *saringi*, fretted, carved and incrusted with jewels, was barely given a second glance. He did, indeed, test its strings with thumb and finger,

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but the condition of its sounding-board was apparently of more importance than the curious beauty of its workmanship.

Finally he carried the guitar to a corner of the room, and, piling up some cushions, settled luxuriously among them and proceeded to make himself acquainted with the workings of the screws that regulated the strings of the instrument. Five minutes later and he struck a chord, and then another, and from that the rest was easy; for soon strange, weird melodies came sobbing out into the quiet room, now soft and low like a crooning lullaby, anon swelling loud and high, with jarring discords leaping in to strive with harmony; with shrieks and groans and all the savage press of battle; and then—a single bell-like note of victory.

And while he played, intent, enrapt, the farther *purdah* lifted quietly, and Loda stood there, listening and watching. She marked him as he sat, from head to foot—the easy grace of his dress, the rhythmic sway of his body to that weird music—aye, she marked him well, and her heart beat strangely; for verily, this was no cold doctor-man, and—and——

She gave a little cry, half of fear, for the man had caught a sudden glimpse of her, and came to his feet with a bound, jarring the strings of the guitar to a harsh discord. He stood bent forward with staring eyes and parted lips, with breath suspended in his

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eager scrutiny; and then one word, a name, fell from his lips, with a soft and tender inflection—"Soondai!"

Something in the name caught at her heart and drew the blood away from her cheeks, but she controlled her emotion quickly as the man advanced toward her.

He dropped to his knees and touched the hem of her robe to his forehead, and so remained, motionless.

She laid her jewelled fingers on his turban and drew away apace, her voice sounding thin and faint as she addressed him.

"Rise, Prince; why kneelest thou to me?"

"Nay, Thakurani," he cried; "forbid me not! I have dreamed of thee *so* long, and in my dreams I always knelt."

"Dost thou know who I am?"

"Aye; thou art called—called—yes, Loda, the Chand ki Beti."

"Then why didst thou call me 'Soondai'?"

"Forgive me, Loda Bai; it was thy dream name, and I have—have loved thee by it. Forgive me, Thakurani; I did but dream."

"Nay, surely, my lord, thou hast honoured me—art thou not a Prince?"

"Aye, Chand ki Beti, I am Rama Lalkura, of Bhaitypore," he exclaimed, rising; "and thou hast been Soondai, the White Pearl, since even the beginning."

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"But thou art dreaming still, my lord; I know not thy Soondai. I am Loda the Egyptian, and so have been since my birth, as all men will tell thee."

He looked at her curiously, doubtfully, as sometimes Mahommed was wont to look—aye, as though striving to read her aright; then with a gesture of submission he exclaimed, "What matter, Thakurani—Soondai or Loda? Thou hast called me, and I am here to do thy will."

"Dost speak from thy heart, my lord?" the girl asked, "or is this poetry, to match with thy music?"

"Ah, Soondai, thou knowest me better than to ask; besides, surely thou doubtest not music and song?"

"Nay, I tell thee I know thee not, and I am *not* 'Soondai'; and as for music—well, I will tell thee if I doubt it when thou has sung to me. Come, let us go hence into a brighter room, and thou shalt speak to me with thy music."

They passed into the room where he had watched beside her that first night. She eyed him closely as they came in, but his face was passive, and if he recognised the room he certainly gave no sign.

The chair where he had smoked and dozed was there, drawn close to the divan, and the tabaret with the tobacco, the cordials, and the array of curious coloured drinking-glasses—all was as it had been before. But when the girl lay back on the divan the man ignored the chair and seated himself

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sedately among the cushions that littered the floor at her side.

"What shall I sing, Chand ki Beti? What is thy pleasure?"

And Loda answered impulsively, "Sing me a song of thy Soondai, that I may judge whether to be jealous or no."

He began with no hesitation one of those dreamy Oriental prose poems, accompanying it with low minor chords that aided the expression wonderfully, now tender and sweet with the scent of the rose garden, and anon rumbling deep with Yamma, the Judge of the Dead, and his voice came rich and full as he half recited, half sung——

The Song of the Roses

On a summer night, long, long ago,
I walked in my rose garden—cool and gray.
The pale cold moon was shedding her mystic light
On Neem and Peepul.
And the scent of roses and jasmine
Mixed in with the shimmering whiteness.
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

I had left my restless couch,
Full of vain longing after thee.
A bulbul singing in the thicket called me forth—
Called me forth to the silvery moonlight
And the roses.
And the scent of the roses
Filled the whole world cloyingly.
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

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I saw thee lingering there among the roses—
Crowned with them and robed in trailing white.
Or was it but a phantasy of moonlight
That beaconed me that night,
As I wandered with the burden of my longing,
Seeking ease?
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

Lo, heart of my heart, I have sought thee—
Followed the breath of thy fragrance,
Wherever it scented the air—
Since thou didst call me, Beloved,
From out of the cluster of roses—
The lang'rous roses
Which thou didst caress.
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

I have wrestled with Yamma, the Judge of the Dead,
And plunged from the earth
Down like a plummet to hell.
I have struggled with Indra, and sought thee in Heaven;
In the realms of the sun and the moon and the stars,
I have followed my quest.
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

Ah, heart of my heart,
Speed not so fast, I pray thee—
Linger again midst the roses—
That I may touch my parched lips
To the hem of thy robe—just once, Beloved,
Ere I go hence to Yamma; for lo!
I am faint and weary with longing.
Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai.

The song ceased, but the music lingered wistfully, as if loath to go. And the singer drooped his head

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toward the divan, lower and lower, till he rested his cheek on the gold-brocaded hem of the girl's robe. And Loda forbade him not. She was leaning forward on her elbows, staring out of great wide eyes—back, back into the forgotten past.

And so they sat on with the ghosty refrain of the song still hovering over them. And then Loda came back from her Dead with a shudder. She touched the singer gently—almost tenderly—but he lay inert, heavy with sleep—for lo! the dawn had come.

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CHAPTER XI

ABDULLA MILLIK was considerably dissatisfied. He was also restless, nervous, and apt to jump when addressed suddenly. When a native gets "nerves" you may depend on it he's in a bad way. Abdulla's nerves might have been attributed to a conscience but for the fact that that uncomfortable appendage had died prematurely while he was young. So far, his betrayal of Meredith had netted him exactly five rupees and a number of promises. Four of the former a *nautch* girl had taken with a high hand, and the other one —which had only escaped a like fate by being securely hidden in a fold of his *dhotee*—consoled him for the loss of the rest by getting him comfortably drunk.

The news of the attack on the Doctor by Aguf the Red, happening as it did within an hour of his return from the house in Beebe Jan Street, was shock number one. However, the drunk came opportunely in the small hours of the following morning. It lasted well through the inquiry that followed—for *arrack* is cheap—and by the next day he was quite resigned to his Sahib's fate. He even

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made quiet arrangements, in case of the Doctor's demise, for the abduction of the dog Stubbs, who had shown a fatuous liking for the rascal since his early puppy days. The dog was easily worth three hundred rupees, and he had just concluded a bargain with a man in Nagdavee Street—who was going to Jodhpur the following week—for eighteen rupees cash, three ounces of opium, and an ugly looking sheath-knife, warranted "Made in Sheffield, England." As the Sahib, from reports, showed no immediate intention of dying, our friend thought it would be advisable to conclude the bargain anyhow; and he was about to start with Stubbs on a casual stroll toward Nagdavee Street, when a *gharrie* drove up—and Meredith Sahib stepped out! That was shock number two. It rattled him so badly that he hardly noticed Stubbs, who bounded forward to meet his master with a howl of delight, which changed to a growl and a snap as the Doctor stooped toward him. The Sahib drew his hand away quickly, with an expression of surprise, and the dog slunk behind Abdulla with a bristling spine and a curling lip.

The *hamal* recovered himself quickly and followed Meredith to his rooms, where Stubbs ensconsed himself under the lounge and met all attempts at civility with low ominous growls.

But Abdulla's bad time had commenced! Doctor Meredith hadn't been home a week before the *hamal*

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was filled with a most unholy fear of him, and in thorough sympathy with Stubbs, who lost no opportunity of showing his unaccountable antagonism toward his master despite the fact that the latter did everything in his power to bring him, by kindness, to a better state of mind. There had, of course, been all sorts of wild tales circulated over the whole country anent the "Man with the Mark." Every bazaar was full of them, each seemingly more idiotic than the other, and consequently finding hosts of believers among the lower caste natives, who have a penchant for the wonderful rather than the exact, and Abdulla remembered that while many sang the praises of the coming man vociferously, others equally credible whispered of how he was to bring a legion of devils to tear out the hearts of his foes; that he would wander in the night—stormy, wet nights preferred—laying spells on man and beast; and that those who were unfortunate enough to meet him would see only the "*mark*" burning like a living ring of fire against the blackness of the night! Such and a hundred other feverish marvels, spread by those interested, haunted the *hamal* later, until he began to believe, as his friend Stubbs certainly did, that the Doctor Sahib was an *avatar* of Sheitan himself. He would have left the hospital but for his fear of the methods of the man who lived in Beebe Jan Street, who had sworn to cut off his, Abdulla's, ears if he lost touch with the doctor-man

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or failed to report his doings faithfully from week to week; so he cursed his own particular pet devil a dozen times a day for leading him betwixt two such evils—and held on to his job.

Now Abdulla's state was not altogether unjustified by the Doctor Sahib's manner since his accident, and others besides the wretched *hamal* had noticed it; some even shook their heads regretfully and said it was a "damned shame," clearly imputing certain little eccentricities to his late accident and cheerfully suggesting the fact that he was a hopeless case.

These peculiarities were noticed mostly by the students and apothecaries, and among the more marked was his apparent forgetfulness of the most commonplace details of hospital work. He approached one of the ward beds the second morning after his return to work just as an apothecary was removing the thermometer from a patient's armpit. The man courteously handed the slender glass tube to the Doctor for his inspection instead of marking the temperature himself, and, as the apothecary said later, when telling the story: "He looked almost dazed when I offered it to him, turned it over in his hands helpless like, and then what d' y' think? Damned if he didn't ask me what the thing was for! Say, you chaps, he's off, sure as eggs!"

That was one of many incidents; and each added its mite to form the concensus of opinion, which, while its holders were sympathetic and shielded him

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as much as possible, was bound to come sooner or later to the notice of the higher powers.

That the man was under some considerable strain no close observer could doubt. His attention seemed restlessly, nervously alert, and he had developed a suspicious temper which was very irritating to his friends. It was not so much that he said anything offensive, as that he looked it. He became aggressive to his most cordial sympathisers, and seemed continually doubtful of the integrity of their motives.

A trick of talking to himself capped the sum of his delinquencies. He formed the habit of wandering about at night in the botanical garden that surrounds the hospital, and the younger students would watch him from the dispensary windows, and even hide in the shrubbery, and listen curiously, as he passed, to his low eager utterances. It did them little good, for he was usually speaking some strange jargon which they unanimously dubbed as "rot" but which nevertheless added just a little awe to their curiosity. Later, a *bheestee*, a hillsman from the border, overheard the Doctor and declared that he had recognised the strange mutterings as a Sanskrit dialect called Parbatiya. This absurd statement was absolutely discredited by all save Abdulla Millik, and while it corroborated his prejudices, it certainly did not add to his comfort.

Now Abdulla, while a hospital *hamal*, acted, be it understood, as *khansamah* and general factotum

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to the Doctor—kept his rooms in order, served his meals, and looked to his comfort generally. This necessitated his possession of a key to the rooms, and a consequent responsibility for the contents.

One night when returning from ward duty he heard Stubbs whining in the veranda outside of Meredith's windows, to where the dog had been relegated after all attempts at friendship had been viciously refused. Abdulla had conceived a great sympathy for the dog of late, so he went around and squatted by him in the shadows. The two comforted each other, and by and by the man, at least, fell asleep.

He was waked some time later by the restless movements of the dog, who was shivering and alternately growling and whining. Abdulla came to himself slowly, and drowsily tried to hush the dog while but half awake. He became gradually conscious, however, of a light shining into the dark corner where he lay, and held himself motionless till his wits came back. Then he stiffened into an attitude of rigid attention, with his bare brown arms straining round the bulldog. One of the *cheeks* [bamboo window blinds] was drawn up some few inches, and the light was streaming through from the room within, while a solemn voice was speaking hardly above a whisper, but making up in intenseness what it lacked in sound.

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Slowly and cautiously the man in the corner crouched forward and down, his curiosity overcoming his fear. The dog crouched, too, and both lay with their eyes glued to the open space beneath the *cheeks*, shivering together in common sympathy.

There was a man in the room—a native—standing with his back to the windows so that Abdulla could not see his face. At first he was sure it was a thief who had gotten in by a side door to which the Sahib alone was supposed to have the key, and which led by a narrow way through the garden and out into the lane which skirted the hospital. So sure was the *hamal*, that he loosed the chain quietly from the dog's collar and had his hand on the *cheeks* to lift them and let the quivering animal through, when something in the strange visitor's attitude arrested him and struck a cold fear to his heart. His arm closed tight round the dog's neck again, and he pulled the big body close in to his own brown chest to dull the sudden jumping of his heart. That was no *bhudmash choor*! He took in at one swift glance the stately figure, the rich, refined dress and the strange but graceful movements, as the man flung out his arms forbiddingly and stepped a little to one side. And he listened, fascinated, to the low voice that broke out reproachfully as though it were addressing some nearby person; and gradually, as he listened, there came

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a certain awesome familiarity with the voice, which chilled the *hamal* with added terror.

Still the stranger's back was turned, and still came those quick, nervous and sometimes broken sentences—generally reproachful exclamations, but again, impatient questions, for an answer to which he would seem to wait with head and body bent forward, and then speak quickly as though he had received it.

Once he cried out quite petulantly: "No, no, no! It's useless to ask! I will not go out till it is done. Brother, why dost thou not rest in peace! Eh—what? No, no; I tell thee I have done all I could, and my destiny is vastly more than thy little trivial concerns, which may be mended in a few hours when I have gone hence. *I* make mistakes! Well, what wouldst thou! Hast *thou* made none while *I* stood in the shade? What of thy wonderful book—art satisfied with its wisdom? Nay, I tell thee thou must wait! 'Tis but a little time, and I will go and trouble thee no more. Aye, and even the 'Mark' shall go out with me! But till then, I tell thee I will rule; so trouble me no more! *Go!* I am weary of thy complainings; and most of these 'mistakes' come from thy foolish interference at inopportune times. Get hence, I tell thee—and sleep till my work is done."

He flung out his arms again with a conclusive gesture and stepped toward the table, while the

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hamal's staring eyes searched every corner of the room for the one to whom he had been speaking. But save for the stranger, the place was empty.

He moistened his dry lips fearfully, with his eyes intently fixed to the strange figure within. Twice the man had almost turned, but his turban was so large and drooped so much that Abdulla had not caught the smallest glimpse of his profile, yet there was an awful certainty in his heart that he would surely know it when he did see it.

As the man moved over to the table the dog strained forward fiercely, and the *hamal* could feel his hard muscular body twitching in his arms, but he knew the dog was too well bred to make any sound at such a time. And the thought came to him then, *Why should he hold the dog back?* Was it not his duty—and Stubbs's—to guard that room? Was not he, Abdulla, personally responsible for its contents? Yet—here was a stranger, a *bhudmash* probably—yes, certainly a *bhudmash*, for all his fine clothes and manners—in the Sahib's rooms at three o'clock in the morning! And the dog—well, the dog was a Rodney, and didn't make mistakes! And then his thoughts wandered away to Beebe Jan Street, even while his eyes were kept riveted on the stranger. What was his duty to the man who lived *there?* What would *he* expect him to do in such an emergency as this? He gave a shiver, and the chain that he had slipped from the dog's

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collar fell out of his *dhotee* onto the stone floor with a clatter. The man in the room started, turned his face to the window, and Abdulla looked up from his hiding place straight into—Sahib Meredith's eyes.

It seemed to the *hamal* that his master was gazing directly at him, and an overpowering terror gripped him. He sprang back with a little half-articulate gasp. still gripping the now furious dog, but as hasty footsteps crossed the room he let him go with a shrill cry, even as the *cheeks* were thrust aside.

Meredith caught but a glimpse of a fleeting white figure, and then the dog sprang full at his throat, catching him off his balance and bearing him down with a crash.

Fortunately, the Doctor's *dhotee* flung up as he fell backward, and the dog's teeth met in a dozen folds instead of in his master's throat; still it was a mighty difficult position. Stubbs was tearing savagely, and the same cloth that protected the man's throat also hampered his arms. But before the dog could get a fair grip there came a scuffling on the veranda; the *cheeks* came crashing down with a grinding tear, and a huge ape-like figure sprang across the floor, gripped the dog's throat in two great hairy hands and wrenched him away, struggling and growling; then, swinging him high, was just about to dash him down on the stone floor

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of the veranda outside when the man who had been saved called imperiously, "Stop!"

The intruder paused and turned his gaze questioningly upon the Doctor, as if surprised at the command.

"Ah—it is thou, Ben Alif! Well, don't stand there like a fool. Put the dog down!"

"Aye!—with his brains to the stones, the Son of Sheitan!"

"Not if thou has respect for thine own few poor ones, my friend."

"*Bahadur*—thy word is law."

"Well, take him outside and tie him up, and see thou to it that not a hair of his head is harmed! Then return here—I would speak with thee."

Ben Alif took the half-strangled dog out among the shrubbery and whistled. A man slipped up to him directly and an instant later another.

"Well," the dwarf questioned, "where is the carrion?"

"Nay, we know not; we came by the great gate, and the man ran by the way of the lane, and when we followed, Selim and Sher Ali were close upon him; so we came back to wait by thee."

"Well, take this whelp of Sheitan; and mind thee, Rhamin, thou silly fool, the dog has teeth. Here, take thy *puggaree* and tie his head up. No, not that way, fool! Hast thou never bitted a horse? In his mouth—tight. Yes, that's it; now round

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his throat—so. Now, devil! Now, swine dog! Bite! Bite! Bite if thou canst—thou cast of a hell hound! How dost thou like the taste of Rhamin's head-cloth, eh? If thou canst stand that, thou must be strong indeed!

"Now, take him round to Esoofalli's stable and tie him tight. And if he gets away or any mischance befalls him, thou hadst better get drunk quickly, for it will be thy last chance. Hurry, now!"

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CHAPTER XII

THE dwarf watched his two lieutenants out of the compound bearing the muffled body of the dog between them; then he set off at a lumbering shuffle, looking, as he sped past lighted patches from the college offices, for all the world like some great ape—the long swing of his hairy arms and the forward droop of his shaggy head heightening the illusion. He was as nearly nude as decency would permit, and his massive black figure was unrelieved by a single touch of white, his *langouti* even being a dark-coloured cloth that girded his mighty loins without breaking the shadow note. This was the man's working costume; it left his great limbs free in matters of attack and defense—and if gossip is to be credited, these matters were of not infrequent occurrence. He was suspected of being the executive of Yah Mahommed's justice—which had the reputation of being arbitrary and decidedly unpleasant—besides holding his more envious office of guardian to the Chand ki Beti. More than one rash defier of the old Moslem had stumbled against this uncouth shadow in the nights when the moon was hid, and when he recovered

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from the meeting—if he was so fortunate as to recover at all—he was very apt to mend his manners.

Ben Alif shambled down the lane a piece, looking for some sign of his two other followers and the man they had pursued, but the lane was evidently empty, and muttering execrations on their heads in some outlandish tongue, he turned back toward the Sahib's quarters.

As a matter of fact, Abdulla Millik was at that moment safely tucked away in a corner of the hospital cook-house, where he had arrived by a swift and skilful detour, successful, thanks more to the darkness and his pursuers' haste than to his own wits. Some hot coffee and a little rice, followed by a meditative *birri*, served to restore his courage somewhat, so that he was soon able to reason away his fears. Probably those Sons of Sheitan, whoever they were, had gone to the Sahib's aid; but even supposing the worst—that the Sahib had been hurt and also had seen him, Abdulla—still, even then, he had but done his duty, aye, a meritorious act! How was he to know that the Sahib went round masquerading in native clothes at night? And as for recognising him, how was that to be expected when even the dog failed to do so? And here Abdulla laughed craftily, and made bold enough to leave the kitchen and hie him over to his own quarters, where he once more carefully rehearsed his story—in case of trouble.

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Meantime, Ben Alif had returned to the Doctor's veranda, and now stood halted at the window. He could see through to the farther door and he saw the Doctor, rehabilitated, standing in the open doorway, talking to an apothecary who had been roused up by the commotion and had come to inquire the cause. The Doctor must have made a hurried change of raiment, but it was complete, or else his long flowered dressing-gown hid any discrepancies.

"No, Martin," he was saying, "it was only that fool dog. A *bandicoot* got in under the *cheeks* and waked me up. I fetched Stubbs in and they had a deuce of a time. Sorry we disturbed you, old chap, but I had no idea they'd kick up such a racket."

"Did he get the beast, Doctor?"

"No; I forgot to close the shutters and he got clean away. Good-night."

And then the door closed, and the Doctor came over toward the window and there saw Ben Alif waiting.

"Come in, man—and speak low. What didst thou with the dog?"

"Sahib, we took him to the stables of Esoofalli, over on the Nesbit road just beyond the Dinwar Temple; he is a friend of mine and will tie the *kutta* up till the Sahib has need of him."

"Thou must have hurried to get so far and back in so short a time," said the Doctor suspiciously.

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"Nay, Sahib, I did not go, but sent two trusty ones who were with me."

"Very good. Now, why wast thou and thy two trusty ones so far from the Bendi Bazaar? Aye, how camest thou so opportunely, Ben Alif? Not that I regret thy coming, man, but I am curious to know. Twice of late I have fancied I saw thy wondrous shadow gliding near me when I have been belated in the bazaars. Speak, man, hast dared to follow me?"

"Aye."

"So, thou art a spy!'

"Thakur, I am no spy—though had I not been near thee this night it had gone hard with thee."

"Thakur? Thakur? Why callest me so?"

Ben Alif shuffled clumsily and avoided the Doctor's keen eyes as he answered haltingly: "Nay, Sahib, it meant nothing—'twas but a trick of my poor speech. I am from the hills, my lord, and——"

"Ben Israel Ben Alif, thou liest!"

"Aye, my lord, I lied."

"And thou knowest me?"

"Aye, I know thee."

"Drop thy gruff voice, man—the night has a thousand ears. Now, whom thinkest thou I am?"

"Thou art he who was to come."

"Ha—a—ah! How camest thou on this matter?"

"In the fight with Aguf the Red, Thakur, when I brought thee forth from the doorway, thy dress

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was torn—thy coat and thy *banian*—and I saw who thou wast."

"And the others who were with thee?"

"Nay, only I, my lord; I covered thee with one of the sheets we got from the temple girl."

"And thou didst tell thy mistress?"

"Nay, my lord; nothing is hid from the Wisdom Beebi; besides, she nursed thee back to life."

"That is so. And does she know of thy knowledge?"

"My lord, I think she knows all things, but she has never questioned me."

"And what art thou, Ben Alif—for, or against, the 'Mark'?"

"I, Thakur, am the slave of the Chand ki Beti. Beyond that, I am nothing."

"Well said, my—friend. Thou art loyal. Now, tell me truly, how camest thou here to-night?"

"My lord, it was the Wisdom Beebi's order that we should ever follow thee in thy night walks, that no further harm might befall thee. We left thee this night at the door of thy house; aye, Thakur, it is true I was scarce ten paces from thy side. Then we returned swiftly to the house of Loda Bai, and while we had been gone the crystal had spoken, and Loda Bai called me and showed me the picture in the glass. I saw thy lighted room, my lord, and outside, in the shadow watching thee, a man and a great dog, and I saw the man loose the dog upon

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thee, and then came the cloud and there was no more. As thou knowest, Hazoor, the glass speaks in advance, but we knew not how much, so we ran. Selim and Rhamin and Sher Ali and Ahmed and I, thy servant, ran through the night, my lord, and when we were come within a stone's throw of thy window and had marked its light, a black shadow rose on the lighted screen of thy *cheeks*—nay, two shadows, —of a man and a dog—then the *cheeks* were lifted and the dog sprang, but the man slipped away into the shadows, followed by Sher Ali and Selim, and whether they have caught the dastard son of a pig, Allah knows, though I fear me he gave my friends the slip in the darkness, for they know not the grounds as well as I."

"And thou thinkest this was the work of those who know me?"

"Aye, my lord; so it seems to my poor wits."

"But who could possibly know?"

"Nay, my lord, that is beyond me; but thou hast not forgotten thy late meeting with the beggars; what thinkest thou, Thakur?"

"Aye, that is so."

"Also, my lord, beggars—pariahs—do not attempt dacoity on Sahib-logue for any small thing."

"Speak out, then, my friend; give me thy true thought."

"Thakur, it seems surely there were those that

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knew thee and knew of the moonstone that thou wast carrying, and so thy downfall and the loss of thy charm came about."

"But who—who could know either of me or the stone? For I was not I, but the doctor-man, and *he* had never the slightest clue."

"But, my lord, bethink thee. Thy coming has been looked for by friend and foe; the very children babble of it; and there be they who are wise in dreams, and they who can search out any hidden matter; and there have been spells and counter-spells for and against thee, and there is never a *jadoo* maker in the whole city but who works for or against thee, Thakur. But the Wisdom Beebi is higher than them all, beyond all compare, and none will prevail against thee, though they will surely push thee hard."

"Thine are words of wisdom, Ben Alif, and beyond thy hill tribe's getting. May thy gods be kind to thee, my brother, for thy service to me this night."

. . . . . .

The next morning when Meredith awaked, Abdulla had already prepared his bath, and entered a few moments later with the usual *chota-hazri* of tea and toast. He glanced with a little apprehension toward the curtain beyond which the Sahib was splashing, and then proceeded to set the room to rights, fastening up the broken *cheeks* and restoring order generally. Despite his effrontery, however,

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he was decidedly relieved by the Doctor's pleasant greeting in response to his obeisance, though rather surprised at the Sahib's failure to introduce the subject of the night's fracas.

He stood behind his master's chair while he munched his toast and drank his tea, and then placed the cigarettes and matches to his hand.

Finally, as there seemed to be no intention of broaching the subject, the *hamal* crossed over to the broken *cheeks* and engaged himself still further repairing them. Having made up his mind while thus employed, he rolled them up and then exclaimed in well-feigned dismay, "*Sahib, kutta kither gia?*"

"The dog," answered Meredith from his dressing-room, where he was engaged with his razor, "Oh, yes, I sent him away to a friend of mine; he's getting too savage to keep around here."

"Did he tear the *cheeks*, Sahib?"

There was a peculiar look on the Doctor's face as he heard the *hamal's* question, a look of guile, which, when he saw it reflected in the mirror, he smoothed away ere he answered quietly: "No, boy, I did it myself. I came in late from a ball, a fancy-dress—masquerade—where they wear strange dress, you know."

Meredith's voice ceased and he waited for the *hamal's* answer with his glance fixed curiously on the doorway beyond which the man was.

"Yes, Sahib, a *tamasha*—I understand." And

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Abdulla, too, gazed at the doorway, silently, meditatively.

"I was smoking," continued the Doctor between scrapes of his razor, "and I thought I heard some *bhudmash* on the veranda." (Scrape! Scrape! Scrape!) "What was I saying? Ah, yes, a *bhudmash;* well, I lifted the *cheeks*, and Stubbs—foolish Stubbs—thought I was the *bhudmash* by my strange dress, and sprang at me, and between us" (Scrape! Scrape! Scrape!) "we—that is—yes, between us, we tore the *cheeks.*" (Scrape! Scrape! Scrape!)

"Yes, Sahib. And the *bhudmash*—the real *bhudmash?*" questioned the *hamal*, who was getting nervous over the long-drawn-out sentences.

"A *bandicoot*, Abdulla—undoubtedly a *bandicoot!*" (Scrape! Scrape! Scrape!)

"Yes, Sahib—a *bandicoot* beyond a doubt. Sahib should set a trap."

"Good, Abdulla; very good. We will set a trap."

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CHAPTER XIII

NATURALLY when Nicholas returned from Poonah he was much disturbed by the rumours of Meredith's condition, though far from crediting them fully. To be sure, his friend did not seem quite up to the mark—he was often preoccupied and lazily disinclined to lead their conversations in his usual vivacious manner. Also, there was a certain constraint, a wariness, about the man which Nicholas never recollected noticing before—he seemed to be cautiously weighing and watching things and people, himself included, and even in his least reserved moments Nicholas was conscious of a subtle barrier that fenced his friend about. In the old days, Meredith had ever been the aggressive one—rapid of thought and spontaneous—so that his present odd attitude was doubly noticeable to Nicholas. But even with the added fact of a slightly erratic or impaired memory, all this might have been the result of his hurt without justifying any such conclusions as the other men had arrived at.

He was, however, considerably mystified about Stubbs; for Allan had been very fond of the dog—in fact, the two had been nearly inseparable—and

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when his friend insisted on his taking the animal and keeping it indefinitely, he was certainly astonished, although he acquiesced in the arrangement without much comment. Meredith's statement that Stubbs had turned against him was easily demonstrated to be correct; for when they went over to the stable to see him, the dog tried again and again to get at his master, and finally grew so furious as to be unmanageable. Meredith watched him thoughtfully as he strained at his heavy chain, and finally left him to Nicholas, who soon brought him to a state of quietness; and later Stubbs showed his new master the most pathetic affection, as if to make amends for his attitude toward Meredith.

A large amount of work had accumulated during Nicholas's prolonged absence at Poonah, and as he reckoned it would take him the better part of a month to catch up and get everything enough advanced to take the holiday he and Allan had agreed on, he proposed that they make their start about the first of the coming February. He had been a little doubtful if Allan, in his present nervous condition, would be willing to stick to the arrangement and make so long a trip, but was agreeably surprised to find him quite anxious to get away. As Meredith said himself, half-apologetically, he did not seem able to get his grip on the interests that had absorbed him before his accident; his book was quite out of the question, and his hospital duties absolutely

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irksome, while the continual surreptitious surveillance by which he was surrounded was a source of irritation, though it was so unofficial, as well as intangible, that it was impossible to take any action about it.

Toward the end of Christmas week, Nicholas heard it whispered that the Surgeon-General had been inquiring into Meredith's case, and that it was probable that he would be asked to send in his resignation and be advised to either return home or take a long vacation at one of the hill sanitariums. This seemed to him intensely unjust and quite unnecessary, and, without mentioning the matter, he posted straight off to Surgeon-General Beattie's office. He stated the case rationally from his own point of view, and showed how such a course would be apt to reflect on the after life of his friend; he explained their intention of taking a six-weeks' trip into Behar, and begged Doctor Beattie to let the matter lie over until they saw what that trip did for Meredith. He professed himself as being profoundly certain that there was nothing wrong which could not be set right within a very reasonable time, and the Surgeon-General, who knew and appreciated Nicholas's worth as a factor in the medical history of the city, agreed to let the matter stand over as desired unless some marked change in Allan's condition should make his removal a necessity.

It was late in the afternoon when Nicholas left

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the "Burra Sahib's" office and stepped into his *gharrie*. His practice lay almost entirely among the natives, with whom, in the course of some fifteen years, he had made a reputation not only as a skilful "Hakim" but also as a "Wise Man." There was never the most subtle caste difference with which he was not familiarly acquainted, from those of the high and mighty Brahmin down to the Sudras, aye, and the Chucklas and their enemies, the Pariahs. He could tell a Vishnuite from a Sivaite, or one of the right-hand faction from one of the left, with never a second glance, and verily, no punctilious Brahmin jealous of the privileges of the triple-cord was more careful in the matter of etiquette than this brown, bespectacled doctor, who claimed America as his home and bragged about her prowess incontinently, and yet who probably would not have exchanged one narrow lane—say the Bendi Bazaar—for a brownstone block on Fifth Avenue. The place and the people were a constant source of quiet delight to him. The East had gotten her soft arms around him and was whispering in his ear—perhaps that was why he shouted so loud for America.

He drove slowly through the bazaar, drinking in the busy bustling life with its endless motley of race and colour; swarming crowds coming and going between the curiously carved and painted houses; some in bright gala dress, and again others, indeed most, in a scant loin cloth, a turban, and perhaps

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a gaily painted umbrella. Hindus, Mussulmans, fierce hairy Baluchs, Negroes, and Chinese, cheek by jowl with lordly Rajputs, big Afghans from the North, Jews, Lascars, Fakirs, and Sahibs, and beggars—beggars innumerable, sitting in the dust, squatting in every shady nook, and rocking themselves drowsily to and fro to their everlasting monotone of "Dhurrum—Dhurrum——"

There were slim, bare-limbed Indian girls, brown and comely, who swaggered back and forth and in and out the throng, bearing aloft on their heads great brass *lotahs*, or baskets of *chupatties*, and perchance with a little naked baby astride of their hip; mischievous brown-eyed Brahmin boys darting here and there, and *bheestees* sprinkling the dust and cooling the calves of the crowd; then the throng parts good-naturedly and a tram-car rolls through, to the wonder and awe of the Baluch, who, in his sheepskin *poshteen*, is himself as great a curiosity to the strangers from the Gulf.

And above all this curious seething Oriental life—above the saffron, red and blue-hued houses, cocoanut palms and date trees wave their feathered crowns, and the brilliant, blinding sunlight is full of big, hungry, gray-necked crows—insolent pirates—ever darting in and out and down, now into an unwary baker's basket, and anon upsetting the little pots and pans of a sweetmeat vendor in a desperate onslaught on his goods.

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All this keen, pungent life was the very breath of Doctor Nicholas's nostrils, as it has come to be that of other men than he. It was so curiously suggestive. Of what? Ah, that's where the charm lies, and if you are capable of much analysis, the charm has vanished. There is no music in the *bansula*-player's pipes or in the *sitar's* twanging wires; the bazaars are dirty and unhealthy, and the people—pah! But if you once let yourself go—yield to the charm of the charmer—there is nothing like it in the whole wide world. London, Paris, New York—they are like an open book which you have learned from end to end, with no secrets, no possibilities of unknown good or evil; all is cut and dried, precept multiplied upon precept, and the application of them demonstrated beyond a peradventure. But in the East the veil still hangs and is guarded with jealous care. You may draw nigh to it; see curious shadows passing and repassing, perhaps coyly beckoning; catch a soothing, wistful melody running like a golden thread beneath the drums and tom-toms and the screaming of the viols, and perchance, if you are young and strong and fearless—that is to say, if the gods love you and are kind—you may lift a tiny corner of the veil and catch the shimmer and pulse of things ineffable. And after that, you will never see the squalor and dirt—will never heed the discords; the glaring saffrons, blues and reds will soften subtly, as will,

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too, the jarring screams of clarionets and trumpets; you will see a thousand beauties where now there is but one—in the slow soft rustle of the great palms banking in the cool evening breeze against the sunset sky—in the solemn reverential hush of the black-mitred Parsee, and the stately genuflection of the Faithful—as the sun sinks lower and still lower beyond the purple rim of the Arabian Gulf, changing the purple to burnished gold touched and flecked with brilliant greens and paling amethyst. You will hear the tender whispers of the night sighing all about you, and thoughts will come, and dreams, that will wrap you about like a caress; and henceforth the lotus is your portion, for he whom the East calleth becometh her son forever and ever.

This was undoubtedly the case with William Nicholas, staid doctor of medicine as he was, and the probable cause of his successful practice in the native quarter. Few if any of his friends had come in touch with this side of him, and doubtless would have misunderstood it if they had. He may have been rather ashamed of his attitude, in a place where such sympathies are frowned on even if their holder is not treated with an open contumely, but it is far more probable that it was reserve, pure and simple; though when once one got a clue to the poetry in the man it was infinitely amusing to hear his diatribes on modern politics—those of America preferred—so that "Billy Nicholas's

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politics" became a standing joke, and undoubtedly served him well by covering up his other tracks.

It was late when he drove to his club for dinner and still his rounds were not finished, but he sent his *syce* home with the trap and determined to do the rest of his work on foot. He loafed through his dinner and spent half an hour in the billiard room, and then set out for Belassis Junction Road, where he had a case of phthisis that was dragging its weary way to a certain end. There were three other cases to be seen, and the last was in the neighbourhood of Kalbadevi Road.

The Law Courts were chiming the half-hour after ten when he finished his work, and lighting a Trinchinopoly, he sauntered idly away into the night. He stopped now and again in the better lighted bazaars, squinting through half-shut eyes at the curious massing of brilliant light with deep, dark shadows, contrasting as sharp as life and death, yet, when viewed as a whole and from a little distance, blending harmoniously. The Chuckla Bazaar was dark, when he turned its corner, save for a few futile little oil-cups whose flames flickered here and there and only served to reveal the darkness.

He stood at the corner of this inhospitable place for a few moments, and then was turning by a brighter way, when a rocket shot up at the farther end of the street, then another, followed by a great blare of trumpets and drums, and around the

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distant corner swept a sudden, brilliant, noisy pageant fresh from the house of some girl bride. On they came, a wild, joyous medley, flooding the dark bazaar with light and music. It was evidently a great *tamasha*, if the prodigality of *nautch* girls and *Raj-bhats* [minstrels] who led the way was any criterion. These sang and danced to wild, shrill music, halting the whole procession every little while for the delivery of some musical eulogy on either the bride or groom or both. And then they passed and were followed by ox-carts filled with laughing girls and smothered with *neem* and jasmine flowers which they twisted into white scented balls and flung dextrously among the crowd. The nuptial cart was a grand affair of tinsel and flowers and hung about with tiny coloured lamps. In the centre was a flowered canopy beneath which sat the happy couple facing each other, and looking midst this riot of joy as solemn and stupid as a pair of owls. So the torches flamed and smoked and cast huge grotesque shadows, and the dancers and the minstrels and the whole wild crew went riotously on amidst the sparkle and snap and bang of fire-works and the various coloured fires.

And as Nicholas turned his eyes to follow them, he started, leaned forward one breathless instant, then drew back quickly into the shadow. A well-dressed Hindu was standing a few paces from him and directly beside one of those oil-cup lamps, whose

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light fell full on him. Nicholas had glanced casually, then stared hard from the shadow right into the face of—Allan Meredith.

He was fairly trembling as he drew into a sheltering doorway. What did it mean? Surely it was Allan; he couldn't be mistaken! He crept a little forward and peered again, but the man's face was turned away and he seemed as if listening. Faintly now fell the distant music, and fainter still the mêlée of voices. The street was almost silent again, and still that white stately figure stood there waiting. What for? What did it mean?

Then there came a quick patter of unshod feet breaking the silence, and a big uncouth Chuckla, dirty and nearly nude, came out of the darkness, and seeing the white figure, saluted it, "*Ram, ram, Rao-Sahib; the moon has risen,*" and passed slowly on as the other answered, "*Ram, ram; the moon is good.*" And then the stranger turned again and Nicholas looked squarely in his eyes, and was sure. He thought Meredith must surely see him, but he passed on to a by-street, and Nicholas, after a moment's hesitation, followed him. On looking back he saw that the shadow where he had been standing cut as sharply from the light as though it had been a great black pit, so it was almost certain the man ahead had not seen him.

He followed cautiously, crossing the light patches speedily and at opportune moments, and lingering

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in those black places when any danger threatened. Twice the man in front had paused, apparently listening, and each time a stealthy shadow had glided to him and then disappeared as mysteriously as it had come. In the eager pursuit Nicholas had quite lost his whereabouts. They were following the less frequented byways, and though now and again he could catch glimpses of lighted streets, they were shut out directly, before he could decide their locality. Then the man ahead disappeared suddenly around a corner, and closing up quickly, Nicholas found a narrow alleyway, and looking through, saw that it led to an open court, and in this court the stranger was standing. Nicholas halted in the alley and watched, and then after a moment the stranger's voice rang out:

"*Ho—i, Ben Israel Ben Alif, aow, hither aow.*"

Nicholas gasped and looked about him in bewilderment. What the devil did it mean? Then came the opening of the shutter and the dwarf's gruff challenge, followed later by the lantern and the curious mismade man. And then the two vanished up the dark passage.

Nicholas shook himself, took off his spectacles, wiped them helplessly, and as he heard the faint grating of the door bar going home he muttered in hopeless dismay: "Well, I'll be damned!"

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CHAPTER XIV

It was Loda's custom to go with her women to the housetop and sit there in the cool of the evening, high above the hum and throb of the bazaars. It was a delightful retreat, shut in with gaily striped awnings, and banked and massed with rare flowering plants. The roof itself was spread with rugs and piled with pillows where one might lie and dream and watch the stars, and look out over Back Bay—for the house was high—and catch a glimpse of the moonlit sea, with now and again a shadowy lateen gliding ghostlike by.

She sat there on the night when Nicholas followed Meredith to her gateway, deep in thought, as was often the case with her of late. She was lying in a corner, resting her chin in her palms and staring away out under the awning to the distant gulf. There were opal lamps gleaming among the oranges and oleanders, that tinted and softened the darkness without destroying its restfulness. In this half-light her face looked troubled; her brows were drawn down and met in an almost straight line—an old trick of hers when her ghosts were walking, and which her women well knew betokened a mood

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which must be respected. When she looked as she did to-night even little Bodi Bai, the irrepressible, lay still and watched her mistress with no little awe, while the old woman sat crouched in the shadows with her *sari* drawn across her wrinkled face, muttering *munthra thunthras.*

Loda was full of a great unrest and the cause was Meredith, the hard, cold, doctor-man—or no, not he, but what she had made him. For lo! the thing which she had brought forth rose up and confounded her. She had willed this man to love her, to be her slave that she might use him, aye, betray him, and he had obeyed her to the very letter. But the spirit—the spirit—ah, there was the rub; there was something that ever just evaded her, and, though she *had* set her own fair picture in this man's heart and brain, what of herself? Was there a moment, day or night, dreaming or waking, since the night he waked at her command, when her thoughts were free of him? She had wrestled with them, driven them out scornfully, set her whole being to flout the man and his image, but deep down somewhere there was a traitor, and the tender refrain of the song rose like a ghost and hovered about her always:

"Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai."

There it was ringing now. What did it mean? Why did those simple foolish words affect her so? What had she, Loda, the Wise, the Inscrutable, the

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Weaver of Fate, to do with the idle love song of this *Raj-bhat*—nay, not even a real minstrel, but a phantasy, a seeming thing that she had created, she a girl, and which she could blow out as easily as the flame of a taper? Ah! Could she though? And had she the courage if she could? And if not, what then—aye, what then?

Over and over she repeated that vital question, "What then?" and then she grew frightened to think that she had slipped over the intermediate questions, of power and will—had conceded them—and her whole thought was of the results of the concession. What did it mean? Was she losing her power of control—of concentration? Was this *Raj-bhat*, this shadow thing, this creature of her imagination, to prove greater than she? It was preposterous—impossible! The creator must ever be greater than the created, and—— Then her eyes snapped suddenly as a tiny gleam of light came. Oh, why had she not thought of that before? There it was—she had been doubtful of her ability in this matter from the first, doubtful of securely dominating the man; the case had been of so great importance to her protector, Mahommed, and he had impressed the fact on her so strongly, that she had grown nervous and dwelt on the possibility of failure rather than the certainty of success, and that such was a fatal course she had learned long ago. And it naturally followed that this doctor-man reflected

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exactly the condition which dominated her, and as she grew nervous and doubtful so he grew correspondingly aggressive and confident.

She heaved a long sigh of relief; the illumination did not light all the doubtful places, but it gave her what she wanted—a fair working theory to start on, and doubtless the rest would disentangle itself as she progressed.

One thing was certain. She must assert her absolute supremacy over this man; once for all he must recognise her will as beyond question. She had weakly given him liberty; now he must learn his true position as her creation—her slave; lest when the time came, by and by—a cold shudder swept her at the thought—she should not be able to—to——

She could not think the thing!

It suddenly piled up in the darkness, dreadful, abhorrent, as she had never seen it before. Why, it seemed like taking one's own babe by the throat, with one's hands—one's bare hands—— Ah, no——!

Her head drooped down among the pillows and she clutched them tightly to her heaving bosom, stifling her sighs and moans, but still quivering through all her sensitive body. And little Bodi Bai crept back to Ayessha and clung to the old woman for comfort, and she, Ayessha, wrapped her *sari* round the child and together they sat shivering and murmuring

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incantations and anon peering out curiously and with awe at the troubled figure of their mistress.

And then on a sudden the silence was broken by a cry from the courtyard below: "*Ho—i, Ben Israel Ben Alif, aow, hither aow.*"

At the sound Loda sprang erect and for an instant stood with her hands clenched to her bosom, then she drew them away disdainfully, and as she heard the dwarf's voice replying to the call she threw back her head with a gesture of infinite pride that seemed to bode no good for Doctor Allan Meredith.

When, a few moments later, he entered the lower room where she always received him, the girl was lying negligently among her pillows, the picture of luxurious indolence. She wore great baggy Turkish trowsers and was draped about in some black gauzy tissue through which her cool, pliant form was suggested. Her naked feet were but half hid in scarlet slippers, and heavy jewelled *nanparas* of both silver and gold weighed down her shapely ankles. She looked at the man with something of the scornful mockery in her eyes that he had seen there on the first night he had been in this room. He noted it instantly, and also the fact that she made no effort to receive him, barely turning her head when he stepped through the *purdah*. She let him genuflect there before her, and when she spoke there seemed some of the slow scorn in her voice that showed in her eyes.

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"So, my lord, thou hast deigned to visit the house of the sorceress once more; pray tell me how I may serve thee? Shall I read thy horoscope, or the fate in thy hand—or maybe thou wouldst have little Bodi Bai gaze in the ink-pool, my lord?"

He looked down at her curiously from a little distance where he stood partly in the shadow. His eyes narrowed just a trifle, and the ghost of a smile struggled with his lips as she gibed at him, but it was gone in an instant as he answered gravely:

"Nay, Loda Bai, I am not here to demand service from thee, but to render it."

"To render service to me? Nay, I thank thee; but I, my lord, certainly have no need to trouble thee in any matter. I believe I have people below who attend to all my wants."

"Nay, Rani-Sahib, I am serving thee even now."

"How? Thy speech is subtle, my lord, and I am but a woman."

"Aye, by serving as a target—an unworthy one, doubtless; still a target—for thy wrath. Was it for this that thou didst call me, Loda Bai?"

"I did not call thee."

"Then if thou didst not call, an angel did, and the voice was like unto thine. Forgive me once more for breaking in on thy privacy, and let me depart."

He was moving toward the doorway in a dignified retreat when the girl's voice stopped him. It was

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no part of her plan to let him go thus, and even while he was speaking a new idea seized her. She sat up among her cushions and spoke imperiously:

"I did not bid thee go. May I not be touched with bile, or in a heavy humour, but thou, who hast declared thyself my slave so often, must stalk away with sullen sour mien? Yea, thou hast trespassed; but now, I bid thee stay. There, sit thee down, for love of all the gods. Are there not pillows enough, that thou must stand glowering there? So; that is better. Now it seems that perhaps thou mayest serve me after all, my lord, if thou wilt so condescend, though I did not call thee—mark that well! Perchance it was thy Soondai, but surely 'twas not I."

"So I may serve the queen, it matters not who called."

"Wilt thou obey me absolutely, and without question, this night in whatever I command?"

"Loda Bai, I have said it oft; try me once."

"So, then, for the nonce thou art 'my lord' no longer, but my slave of thy own free will?"

"Even as I ever have been."

"Suppose I give thee poison, wilt thou drink it?" she questioned banteringly.

And the Doctor answered "Aye."

"Or scourge thee—wilt thou submit?"

And again he answered "Aye."

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"She sat up among her cushions and spoke imperiously."

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She crossed the room swiftly to the cabinet from whence she had taken her dream potion for Ben Alif and drew forth another flask, and, filling a tiny measure, came back to the waiting man and presented it to him.

"Drink, slave!"

He looked up into her eyes as he took the cup and his lips murmured a toast in the barest possible whisper ere he drained the potion. He turned the cup down when he had drunk and sat silent and still, while she stood before him equally motionless, but with her eyes gazing off beyond him into the shadows of the room. The silence grew almost oppressive before the girl spoke, and then it seemed by an effort that she did so.

"Where art thou, slave?"

There was no answer, though a slow, almost perceptible quiver passed over the man's frame. She spoke again less dreamily and with a ring of imperious command in her tone. "Speak! Where art thou?"

Then the answer came rumblingly and the sitting figure bowed till his turban nearly touched her feet. "Lo, I am here, Rani-Sahib, but thy bonds lie heavily on me."

"So, it is well; art not my slave, and shall I not do with thee even as I will?"

"Aye, Rani, even as thou wilt." And this time the man bowed lower and his lips touched the tip of

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her slipper; and so he knelt, and not to Siva or Vishnu or any of the gods could he have bowed more humbly. She looked down at him curiously and her old scornful smile curled her lips. Verily, this was indeed the thing she had created and no other. She stirred her slipper at his lips disdainfully. Was this the cause of her distress so short a time back? Well, it was easily cured. She had but to show her will and he sank down there as verily her slave as poor Ben Alif, aye, more so by far than Bodi Bai—who always pouted, at least, before she succumbed.

And then she suddenly started, for falling softly on the silent room came a subtle melody, the refrain of the song he had sung; not in words—her heart supplied those instantly—but in lingering, loving cadences that reached some dim deeps within her and then rose again with strength and caught at her heart bewilderingly.

"Oh, my Garden of Delight!
Oh, Soondai—Soondai."

She shivered as she looked wonderingly round; it had been so close—clear and bell-like, although so faint—that she could not believe it was but a trick of her imagination, and something of her old trouble closed in on her. Yet so far she had conquered it—could she not feel her creature's warm breath caressing her naked foot where the little slipper failed to cover it? Surely she was the victor! Would that cold, stiff doctor-man ever

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kneel to any woman, let be kiss her feet—and yet—and yet, why this weakness? She dug her nails into the palms of her hands and held her tingling nerves subject by a fierce effort. After a moment she grew quieter, but some of the imperiousness was gone from her voice as she drew her foot away and said:

"Rise, Rama Lalkura, I would speak with thee; but remember, thou art under bonds to me, and thou shalt answer as to Yamma if thou wouldst hold my favour."

He rose to a sitting posture as calm and dignified as though his position had been nothing short of conventional before, and he answered: "As Yamma is my judge, I will speak what truth I know, and if I fail thee, let him send me alone into the darkness. Speak, Chand ki Beti."

She sat down among her pillows again now, and was silent for some time, thinking hard and striving to frame her questions aright. By and by she spoke quietly.

"Who art thou?"

And the man answered simply: "Thou hast spoken, O Chand ki Beti; I am Rama Lalkura, of Bhaitypore."

"And what dost thou here, Rama Lalkura; for Bhaitypore is a far journey."

"I have come to tell thee that which thou seekest to know."

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"Dost thou know what I seek?"

"Aye, I know."

"Speak it, then."

"The heart's desire."

The words fell dully, lacking all animation, but the girl started and half sprang up, and then subsided again, but with the rich blood burning to the roots of her dusky hair; and there was a quiver in her voice as she answered scornfully:

"Thy mysteries, O Wise One, are greater than my poor wits can grasp."

And the patient, monotonous voice replied: "*Such hai*—I have remembered my bonds to Yamma."

She looked at him curiously, searchingly; he had slipped away, out of her power again; he was holding her and she was unable to resist. Her thoughts flew to Mahommed and her great reward, even this, "The heart's desire." The man had spoken true; back of all other things, deep down, hidden away, it still was there, and she knew it, though she had never been able to reach it. Then she questioned him again a little petulantly.

"Since thou knowest me so well, tell me in very truth who I am."

"In very truth," he repeated, "thou art Soondai—the Queen."

"Ah, and since when have I been Soondai—the

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Queen? For of a truth I thought I was Loda—the Witch."

"Thou wast Soondai before thou didst forget the heart's desire, and thou wilt be Soondai again when thou hast found it."

"Ah," she cried a little triumphantly, "then I am not Soondai now; for I know nothing of this futile 'heart's desire,' so thou art trapped from the words of thine own mouth."

"Nay," he replied, unmoved and almost drowsily, "the world will not cease to roll because thou dost forget its motion in thy dreams. Thou *art* Soondai. When thou wakest then wilt thou understand."

"*Ohie!* Me thought 'twas thou who wast dreaming."

She spoke derisively, but her eyes belied the lightness of her words; they had changed from scorn to doubt and from doubt to fear. They were opened wide and fixed on him as he sat before her; and, as one fascinated, she saw him slowly straighten, touch his eyes with the tips of his fingers, and then gaze straight and steadfastly at her. There was nothing in his look to lessen her perturbation; indeed, it seemed to have lost all the somnolence with which it had been charged and was keen, magnetic and vital! It was Rama the Prince who gazed, and not the slave.

"Nay, I do not dream, Rani-Sahib; for if I did,

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I might forget my bonds to thee and Yamma. No, thou hast not sent *me* dreaming, Loda Bai, but another, who does well to rest awhile."

"Thou meanest——"

"Aye, even so; the doctor-man."

He had arisen and was standing over her at his full height, and she was gazing up at him in undisguised terror. He was infinitely above and beyond her now, and there was a something crushing her down, while he seemed to gain added power every moment. She heard him whisper and his voice seemed to come from afar off, aye, out of the forgotten past.

"Soondai—Soondai—hast thou truly forgot?"

And something in her turned traitor again, and her voice tried to cry out to him, but she stifled it back and sank down heavily at his feet—in the very spot where he had knelt at hers.

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CHAPTER XV

MEANTIME out in the night a bell told of the passing of another day—twelve o'clock. The sound of the strokes fell dully on the silence, but seemed to mark a breathing space for the two actors in the curious little drama. Loda lay among the pillows, face down, overcome—daunted; she still clung desperately to the Present, even as she lay there trembling, and yet every moment it was slipping, slipping—slipping through her nerveless fingers, while the Past was welling up, slowly, inexorably; and she, Loda, the Chand ki Beti, the Wisdom Beebi, was lost, hopelessly lost, betwixt the two. She could have screamed out in her terror —the terror of her sudden weakness—terror of that ghostly Past whose clammy touch was chilling her heart. She was falling—falling blindly through space; there was a roaring in her ears; her spirit strove to let go, but the tension of terror was too great—and then the first stroke of the bell fell booming on her outraged consciousness, and then the next, and for the third she waited, and at the fourth heaved a long-drawn sigh, and her reason gained its heights once more. Still she waited and

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counted dully as if there were nothing in the whole wide world worth while but the tolling of that distant clock.

"Soondai, hast thou truly forgot?"

Again the same question, but with a note of gentleness in it she had been too terrified to notice before, and perhaps the slightest tinge of reproach. She answered now, and, curiously enough, her voice had the dry somnolent monotone that had marked the man's shortly before; her eyes utterly lacked their usual luster, and her body rested limply, wearily, among the pillows.

"Aye," she answered; "I have forgot—if I ever knew."

"Art thou awake, Loda Bai?"

"I—— Yes, I—— That is—— Oh, let me be."

Her eyes closed drowsily and a moment later her lips parted; then there came a little nervous twitch and a moan that threatened to wake her. The twitching continued awhile till the man knelt beside her and passed his hands slowly and dreamily over her body without touching her, and as he did so she gradually relaxed; the nervous jumping ceased—and she slept quietly.

Meredith still continued to kneel before her, gazing at her, with his lips working and various changes passing over his mobile face. No words came from his lips, but strong, pregnant thoughts seemed passing direct from him to the sleeper, and

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ever and anon he would raise his arms on high and bring them down in long sweeping passes over her body, as though gathering some subtle force and permeating her with it. And slowly the whiteness in her cheeks grew stained and tinted rosily, and a little fluttering sigh came out between her open lips, and then—a laugh.

Her slender shapely arms stretched out, and with half a yawn, half a sigh, she opened her eyes drowsily and looked around in surprise. Then she sat erect, and seeing Meredith kneeling there, the hot blood rushed quickly to her face and throat and neck. She laughed a trifle nervously as she drew her pillows about her, and then with a little disdainful toss of her head she said:

"Truly, my lord, thou must entertain me more wittily if thou wouldst have me keep awake. I have forgotten quite of what we were discoursing. Stay! Oh, yes; thou wert under bond to tell me a story, but thy prelude was so long and dull I fell asleep. I pray thy pardon for this discourtesy, but—is thy prelude ended?"

"Aye, Thakurani, the prelude is ended."

"*Ah-ie*, that is very good. A *birri?* Yes, I will smoke. And now the story. And if I fall asleep—nay, there, I will not mock thee more, but will dwell upon thy words decorously; but see to it that thy Prince is young and brave and comely, else will I surely sleep again. Now proceed."

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She leaned back easily among her cushions and blew a long, thin smoke-wraith from her lips, even as the bell in the night beyond tolled out the half-hour after midnight, and a wakeful Mullah from some nearby minaret cried out shrilly to Allah, and to the Faithful to watch and pray.

Meredith sighed and seemed somewhat annoyed by the girl's merriment, but began to tell his story, slowly at first and with many halts as of one unaccustomed, but later with a growing intensity and magnetic power that would have graced the grandest Raj-bhat of them all. He began in the old, old, fascinating fashion, that we Anglo-Saxons have adopted and discarded, but which children and poets still love:

"Once on a time, long, long ago, Thakurani, there dwelt on the side of a mountain a Prince. His name? Well, since he must have a name, we will call him Goonarthi. And his mountain was the very top of the world. This Prince had dwelt high up on that mountain with his people since ever the snow had covered the mountain peaks, or so the Raj-bhats at his court were wont to tell him; and you see, Thakurani, since the snows had been there from the Beginning, the Prince might be pardoned a little pride of ancestry. And in the valley, and on the sides of fifty other hills, dwelt a hundred other Princes, each independent and living like a feudal lord—brave, hardy soldiers who would sweep

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down into India, if need be, and carry fire and sword to the very gates of the accursed. And all these acknowledged Goonarthi, not as Master, but as Elder Brother—head of the oldest house in all the world, and with him they never sought any quarrel; but with each other—being of the blood of the hills—they strove continually, so that there was little hope of any organised resistance should an attack be made on their country. Goonarthi might have organised them, to be sure, for they would have followed him to a man, but he had not their lust for fight—he lived perhaps too near the everlasting snows and they had cooled his blood; besides, no thought of outside foes had ever been dreamed of.

"This Goonarthi, Thakurani, was a poet, a minstrel, a lover of music and song—more of a dreamer than a soldier, and most of his days were spent on his mountain, where he had a beautiful rose garden that was the joy of his heart. And, Thakurani, if he was not very warlike or wise, at least he loved his mountain and his people and his roses; while as for the gods, he sang them strange songs and served them with such sacrifice as they loved best; and they in return sent him visions and dreams for which, when the priests heard them, they would have deified him then and there—and, indeed, many of the people in the valley did do secret *puja* to him. But truly he was no *avatar*—only a rough Hill Rajah, softened, mayhap, just a little, by the roses and the

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snow; these two were his loves, and others he had none.

"Now, in time, the unexpected happened, and a foe broke the barriers of the mighty hills and swept down into the valley with a great host of horse and foot; they swept the valley clean from end to end, and the Princes in the hills viewed them with wild dismay. A few of the most daring rushed down to give them battle, but being unsupported they were driven back to their fastnesses with frightful carnage, and then after a few such attempts they gave up all hope of saving the valley and set to strengthening their own forts.

"And the new lord of the valley, whom we will call Sahama, sent to all the Princes peace offerings, but Goonarthi he invited to visit him. And these two became friends—the Raj-bhat Prince and the Hindu warrior—aye, they grew as brothers; and in order to bind the Hillsmen closer, Sahama took Goonarthi one day to his private garden and there showed him one of the fairest of flowers—indeed, so fair was she that the Prince's roses and his white eternal snow would suffice no more. Neither any more did he chant hymns to the gods, but only to her. And she listened to his words and gave him freely love for love, and Sahama watched them ever. And when he saw the desire of each was toward the other, he spake smoothly to his guest, covenanting to give him the girl when he, Goonarthi, had induced

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his turbulent brothers of the hills to recognise Sahama as their liege lord. Does my story weary thee, Thakurani?"

"Nay; but haste thee to the lovers. I care not for the craft of these little kings and princelets."

"Aye, I will even haste; but so much I must show, else wouldst thou think my Prince but a—a *choar*—a rascally *dacoit*. Now, Goonarthi was grieved; he saw Sahama had trapped him, and that behind his words of honey lay a brain, if not a heart, of guile; but for the sake of the girl—what was her name? Have I not spoken it? Well, truly, I forget; she came from a far country, and her name—— Nay, let us call her the White Rose, as even he did.

"As I said, for the sake of the girl the Prince hid his resentment at the King's duplicity and undertook the task. And the two were betrothed privately and then Goonarthi went back to his mountain and his task. He travelled far and wide among his brethren, and they honoured him and considered his words; and having found in the past that they could not stand against Sahama, many of them thought well of Goonarthi's counsel and rode down from their craigs and fastnesses and made obeisance to Sahama, who fêted them right royally and sent them back loaded with costly gifts.

"And the leader of Sahama's army was a mighty warrior from the North, without whom the new lord would never have been able to hold the valley, for

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this man—Shan Ja, we will call him—had held back the Hillsmen while Sahama fortified the valley, and when all was done, this *naik* had built him a house high up on a craig facing the house of Goonarthi, across the valley, and he fortified it and ringed it about with *sangars* of stone so that there was no stronger hold in all the hills.

"One day this man cast his eyes upon the White Rose as she walked abroad in the King's garden dreaming of Goonarthi, and seeing she was very fair, he spake to the King, demanding her as payment for past services. I know not what arguments he used to persuade Sahama to deal treacherously with Goonarthi—they must have been stern ones, for the King's hope of peace lay in the Prince—but he succeeded; and the King sent a messenger to the Prince saying that he might not have that one girl, as her heart lay not with him, but that he should take his choice from fifty other of the fairest girls in all the land as recompense for the disappointment; that these girls were coming from the corners of the earth, whence they had been gathered for the King's pleasure, aye, and the Prince should choose even before the King.

"Goonarthi answered never a word, but shut himself up in his house alone with his grief. At the end of ten days he sent out secret runners by night through all the hills, and gathered his people from the paddy-fields and the maize, from their herding

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of cattle and tilling the ground, and he set them to fortifying his house till it was as strong as the house of his foe, Shan Ja. And he cleared away a secret passage that led from the anteroom of his bedchamber down through the bowels of the earth to a temple of Siva far below and within bowshot of the way that led to Sahama's palace.

"On the appointed day, Shan Ja sent an escort for the White Rose, to bring her to his house. And these were feasted at the palace royally, and there was much mirth and revelry. Even the White Rose was radiant and gay, so that Sahama was bewildered at the change, little guessing that a whisper had found its way from the hills; it was a strange whisper and difficult of comprehension: '*When the gray wolf howls in Chanari Pass, scream aloud thrice, and then lie still and fear nothing!*'

"Meantime the rocky ways that led to the house of Goonarthi were full of armed and silent men pressing on to the aid of the Elder Brother, so that when the escort left the valley—a gorgeous pageant, with much fanfaronade, with the squealing of pipes and the flare of trumpets—there were five thousand stern-faced Hillsmen lying about the rose garden and the house of the Elder Brother. And in the Chanari Pass far below an old priest sat at the door of the Temple and watched for the coming of the bride.

"As the cavalcade came on this darksome desolate

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place—where the horses slipped and stumbled and even the barefooted bearers of the palanquin trod warily and with much caution—the White Rose, startled by the sudden gloom of overhanging trees and rock, asked from behind her curtain where they were. And one at her side made answer, 'The Chanari Pass, Rani-Sahib.' And hearing, she drew back quickly and braced herself among her pillows.

"Then of a sudden a wolf's cry rang out, startling the horses and men, and it was answered by a piercing shriek from the palanquin, followed by another and yet another; and then there was a great commotion. The bearers set down the palanquin in a panic, and it had hardly touched the ground when there came a quick but silent rush of men, cutting the escort clean in two and surrounding the palanquin in a solid mass. These stood motionless, each resting on a naked sword, while round them swelled a sudden, awful din of battle—the whistle and clash of swords, the slipping grind of horses' hoofs, with now a shriek, a savage yell of triumph, or a long-drawn windy groan.

"And as the fight began a hand reached through the curtain to the girl and dropped a white rose in her lap—— Art thou weary, Thakurani?"

It was a foolish question, for the girl had left her recumbent position and was leaning toward him, white of face and tense with her eager listening. She signed him on with gesture almost fierce, ex-

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claiming: "Yes, yes, a white rose. Go on, I pray thee!"

"A white rose, yes," continued Meredith drawlingly, and, eyeing the girl through curious half-shut eyes, he added: "And then another——"

"No, no!" the girl interrupted quickly. "'Twas red—the next was red, I——"

"Ah, yes, 'twas red—we'll make it red," the man said soothingly.

"And all through the bloody fight, with men and horses falling headlong down the sheer rocks to hell, with the blood around them running ankle deep, those great silent ones stood solidly massed and motionless—a living rampart round the palanquin; and ever that hand kept dropping roses, white and red and cream, and each rose meant a message of love that the girl had taught to her Hillsman lover in the garden of the King.

"When the fight was done those silent ones put up their swords and raised the palanquin, with the White Rose nestled trembling amongst her sisters; and they bore it to the temple door, which opened at their call, and then closed them in.

"Thus the Prince took by might what was his by right; and what he had taken he made ready to keep; so that when a messenger came from the King demanding the girl, he found the hills alive with armed men. And Goonarthi's answer to the King was, 'Come and fetch her; or if not thou, then thy

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master, Shan Ja.' But the King in the valley moved not; and Shan Ja was afraid to go up alone against the Hillsmen, so he sent to Goonarthi a runner, saying: 'Let there be peace between us, O Prince; I have no quarrel with thee, but with him who deceived us both. Beware of Sahama!'

"So Goonarthi and his White Rose dwelt in peace, but trusted no man. And nightly they shut themselves in the house and barred the great doors so that none might enter from without. And over the door was set a mighty bell, whose clang was to be the sign for a swift gathering of his people; while the pass and the heights above and below them were guarded night and day; and as a last measure, the secret way was kept clear for flight. And having thus made all things secure, they dwelt in love in the rose garden that lay in sight of the everlasting snows.

"And as the days and weeks and months sped by, they did but cleave the closer each to the other, till, when the cup of their delight was running over and a fair babe crooned at the mother's breast, the end came—swift, sudden and terrible—out of a clear sky, like to the storm that burst between the mighty hills that selfsame noon and wrecked the rose garden, driving the lovers to the house, where they sat looking out into the howling blackness that had swept away the sun and all the glory of a

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brilliant day and seemed to rock the very world in its wild embrace.

"So fell the night, with the women huddled up in terror—with the White Rose wan and weary—and Goonarthi comforting them. By and by they dozed in each other's arms fitfully, with the roar of the winds and the waters haunting them. And then on a sudden there came another sound, Thakurani, and the Prince sprang from his couch, listening. The wild gale was shrieking so high that he could not be sure, but there came an instant's lull, and he sprang for his sword. The great bell was clanging out its sonorous warning!

"He ran to a sheltered window and leaned far out, and in another lull he caught the rippling snarl of *jazails*, a few wind-borne groans and curses, and then the bell was still.

"With the terrified women clinging about him, Goonarthi stood at bay, as later there came a thundering summons on the great teak doors. They could not have beat them down in fifty years, Thakurani, let alone by daybreak, when help would surely come, but Goonarthi lost his judgment in fear for his Rose and her bud, and he sprang forward and hastily forced the spring that held the stone leading to the secret way. And as the stone rolled back a man leaped through, striking as he came, and Goonarthi stumbled before the sudden attack, but the White Rose—the Tender One—caught the

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Prince's sword and struck home so that the man fell backward down the black hole whence he had come.

"But ere the Prince could turn the stone another bounded out, and yet another; and as they came, Thakurani, the Brave One smote, while Goonarthi still struggled with the stone. And maybe she would have held the way—for it was narrow and the stone was half turned back—when a spear, hurled straight and strong, struck Goonarthi in the side and pinned him to the floor. And at that, the poor White Rose dropped her bloody sword and sprang to her love, leaving the hole unguarded.

"That was the end, Thakurani. One caught her by her silky hair, and—— But there, enough; the story's done."

He lighted a *birri* and slowly inhaled its pungent smoke, but the girl sat still, with her face gleaming from a tangle of dusky hair. Her eyes were set and bright, but her mouth was hard—and her heart—and her nails were biting into the palms of her little hands. Then on a sudden she leaned to the man and whispered hoarsely: "No, that's not the end. The story is *not* done!"

"Nay, Thakurani, what wouldst thou? The Rose and her lover have gone hence, and if there was treachery—aye, murder—it was, as I have told thee, long, long ago."

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"And is thy blood so cold," she hissed, "that thou art satisfied to end it so?"

"What wouldst thou, Thakurani?"

"*Vengeance*, Thakur; *vengeance!* Art thou *afraid?*"

She leaned toward him and gripped his arm, panting out the words hotly; then as she gazed into his somber eyes a quick flash of the spirit lighted her.

"What!" she gasped chokingly. "Thou! *Thou* —and—and——"

The man caught her to him quickly and held her close, pressing his fingers to her temples and whispering in her ear. She struggled a moment, then a shudder ran through her slim body and she drooped in his arms like a faded flower.

He laid her down tenderly among her cushions, then crossed the room to where there stood a great jar of roses and amaryllis, and, choosing a delicate white rosebud, he laid it at the girl's neck even as he had seen one lie the night he had come to wake her from her trance. Then he silently left the room and house.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE more Nicholas pondered over his friend's case the more perturbed he grew. 'Twas not merely that he had visited the house of Loda, the Witch, at night, in the guise of a native; that was curious, yet might be legitimate; but when one added the evidence of those mysterious meetings and whisperings with natives which accompanied the visit—the "ram, rams" and the stealthy glidings—the matter became decidedly suspicious.

Since his talk with the Surgeon-General he felt practically responsible to the head of the medical department for his friend, and, aside from that, he was, of course, deeply concerned for his welfare personally. The two men had been very intimate ever since Allan came out from home, and a genuine affection had sprung up between them based on the sterling qualities of both, so that Nicholas was prepared to go a long way to help his friend if he might, yet it was most difficult to see what to do. He knew that the pressure of a pennyweight more or less on certain brain-ganglia made all the difference between sanity and the reverse—yes, between morals and the lack of them.

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To allow that some such modifying influences were at work as a result of his friend's fight, and to seek to remove them, seemed simple till he recalled with added alarm Allan's own story just before he, Nicholas, left for Poonah—of the peculiar interview with the sweetmeat vender. He had been startled at the telling, but Meredith had been so sure of himself, so confident that the phenomenon was somnambulistic and distinctly traceable to neurosis, that, recognising his friend as an authority on the subject, his anxiety lulled, and gradually he had let the matter slip from him. Now the incident clamoured for recognition once more, and complicated matters tremendously by showing that the conditions noticed since Allan's illness had been at least strongly suggested before it.

While he was still worrying over his quandary, a note from Allan cleared up part of the difficulty and relieved his mind considerably. It was to the effect that his friend had forwarded to the Surgeon-General's office an application for three months' sick leave, and that as there was no possible doubt of it being granted, he had hired a little bungalow up in the Malabar section, which happened to have been for rent by the month, furnished. Here he intended to rest until Nicholas was ready to go to Behar.

On the whole, Nicholas decided that Allan had acted wisely, and built a good deal on what the

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change of scene and an open-air life would do for his friend, but he intended to watch him very carefully all the same. McKenzie had sent a warm welcome in answer to Nicholas's letter, and promised them all the *shikarrie* they wanted and as good a time generally as he could bring about.

Meredith's new quarters were comfortably situated toward the top of the hill, above the temple walls of Mahaluxmee. The bungalow was a single-storied affair with four rooms, surrounded by a great trellised veranda, draped in vivid green creepers and starred with brilliant flowers.

Here Meredith ensconced himself with his belongings, including Abdulla Millik, who, for a consideration, had given up his hospital job in order to see to the Sahib's comfort and well-being generally. Allan had dealt very gently with the wily Abdulla; and as a consequence the man had dismissed most of his fears—but relaxed none of his vigilance. While strongly suspicious of his man, Allan could not be certain of his turpitude; there was absolutely nothing to connect him with the attack in the bazaar which had resulted so disastrously—rather, indeed, the reverse—since had he been so connected he surely would also have been chosen to point out to the *dacoits* their victim, instead of leaving that important item to the chance indiscretion of a little *birri-wallah*. But in the matter of the dog he was far from satisfied; for while he had failed to identify

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the man on the veranda that night, the inference that it was Abdulla seemed almost beyond question. Stubbs was decidedly intolerant of natives in general —Abdulla being the exception—and it did seem puerile to imagine that any stranger could invade the dog's particular sanctum late at night, especially in these days when the animal's temper was so uncertain. On the other hand, in the *hamal's* favour, there certainly seemed a total lack of motive. The man on being detected had fled with a cry of undoubted terror, which seemed strange and uncalled for. If it were Abdulla, he had a right on the veranda with the dog—in fact, he often slept there since Stubbs had been turned out—and (Meredith had not forgotten his own appearance at the time) it was of course just possible that the *hamal* had failed to recognise him in time to stop the brute's spring. This seemed fairly plausible even in face of the man's duplicity the following morning; for he knew from experience that the workings of the native mind are tortuous in the extreme. Yet back of all the pros and cons he was intuitively certain that Abdulla was a traitor to him. Instead of throwing him out neck and crop, as he would have done some three months ago, he played the man's own game guilefully and with much skill; but, so far, the *khansamah* had avoided any pitfalls in either a very consummate or a very innocent manner.

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One of Meredith's chief reasons for leaving the hospital was that he might devote his time to a vigorous search for the moon crystal which had been lost or stolen—probably the latter—during his late fight. A sense of its tremendous importance had become impressed on his mind—possibly from Loda's mental suggestion, or again, possibly from the subtle Hindu force which was ebbing and flowing through his mentality—now potent, dominant, masterful, and then weak and uncertain, as the Hindu drew back to gain more power. At any rate, he proposed to leave no stone unturned in his effort to recover the charm.

The wounded pariah had been removed from the hospital to the jail, where he was waiting his trial on a charge of *dacoity* (which means, practically, highway robbery with violence). He had been put through the usual police inquisition while still weak from the slashing the little *bayadere* had given him, but stuck obstinately to one line of defense—which was considerably removed from the truth. He had, according to his story, been praying in the Bali Temple with a fellow mendicant, and on coming out had heard a shout and seen another brother struggling in the hands of a Sahib who was striking him with a heavy stick. This beggar cried to them for help, and, believing his life was in danger, they ran to his assistance, even as the Sahib struck him so heavy a blow as to knock him down. The stick

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then descended on his, the prisoner's, pate, and but for his *puggaree* it would unquestionably have sent him to Yamma. As it was, it knocked him half across the lane; but he got up and rushed at the Sahib, whom he believed had really killed the first brother—and they two fell fighting in a dark doorway, where an accursed *deva-dasi*—probably this fine Sahib's *ourat*—jumped on him from behind and cut him up with a horrible fish-knife, and that was all he recollected till he waked in the *Bottlie-wallah* hospital.

When questioned as to the identity of either or both of the men who were with him, he persisted in denying all knowledge of them previous to that particular night—the one he had met in the temple, and the other was sitting on the steps as they two came out. He knew nothing of any jewelry or money this Sahib was said to have lost—had it been found upon him? Was he in a condition to rob? Nay, he was no *bhudmash choar*, no *dacoit*, as the police persisted in mistaking him! And as for robbery, if there was talk of that, where was his own little bundle of *pice* and his scapular, a holy relic from Kasi? The *pice* were tied in his *dhotee* and the relic round his neck when he left the temple, and now—— Well, the British Raj knew its own business, but to persecute a poor religious mendicant—etc., etc.

This line of defense didn't save the rascal from

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the "*jail-khana*," but neither did it give much help to Meredith or the police in their search for the missing men and the stolen property. Aguf the Red —so named from his scarlet beard—the supposed leader of the attack, had disappeared; while there was absolutely no clue to the other two men implicated, and this despite the fact that Ben Alif and his friends were hunting them day and night.

The *bayadere* who had saved Meredith, and for whom the police were also looking, was lying perdu with Loda—not that the girl was in any way criminally liable, but that her new friends thought it best for her safety to keep her identity unknown to the friends of the man whom she had treated so roughly.

Meredith hoped, if he could find Aguf, to force him to discover the whereabouts of the moonstone; and it seemed that if the fellow were still in the city, the place to look for him would be in some of the noisome alleys off Grant Road or around Camatepura, where such as he might live securely and snap their fingers at the police. These were veritable sinks of iniquity where vice flaunted itself brazenly in the flare of street lamps and to the din of harmoniums and tom-toms—whole streets thus, with women everywhere: languid Kashmir beauties, Persians, tiny Japs and big overweighted Hindus, Sidis, thick-lipped and as black as night, and Eurasians—hanging over balconies, lolling below

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on divans at the edge of the sidewalk, chattering, screaming, laughing and quarrelling like so many nervous parrakeets—painted and bedecked in seemingly every mortal costume under the sun, from a delicate cobweb lace, twisted with apparent lack of care but indeed with consummate skill about a slim young *bayadere*, to the heavily draped *sari* and full stiff trowsers of the usual *nautch* girl, and the modern *decolletté* evening gowns of the Eurasians. Between the houses were little gambling hells presided over by Hindu ruffians clad in the incongruous, half-European, half-native dress—stiff white shirt, collar and tie, low-cut dress vest, all most proper, and then a *dhotee* and a loin-cloth, if you please, hanging about his naked brown legs—a smooth rascal, plausible and, if necessary, murderous.

These streets, with their wonderful display of life and light and ever-shifting gorgeous colour, with the smell of flowers and incense mixing with the acrid odours of narghyls, the noise of the tom-toms and battered harmoniums and the persistent though subdued tinkle of anklets and bangles, silver bells and the thousand other trinkets of the women, added to the musical din of laughter and song, are bewildering, weird, fascinating—what you will, but, above all, horribly evil. And leading off from them like drains are dark, villainous alleys where shadows creep and vile whispers float about; where, if a drunken sailor strays, God help him!

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Doors open in strange, unexpected places and dim patches of light fall out, together with gusts of ferocious revelry, and then they're gone—choked in the blackness—and if you're wise you make a clean bolt back to the better-lighted ways, where you have at least a fighting chance to get through safely.

This was the place which Meredith made up his mind to investigate in his search for Aguf. That it was a dangerous game he realised, and in his regular character and costume probably an impossible one, but with his late facility in the use of the native costume and language he felt fairly confident. He saw that it would be necessary to have an ally in the place to facilitate his going and coming. Abdulla could probably have rendered him considerable service had he been trustworthy, but as it was he had to turn to Ben Alif; and, greatly to his surprise, that curious monkey-man entered into his scheme with avidity and proved himself quite invaluable.

He informed the Sahib that he was well known to several of the resident *nautch* girls, as also were some of his near friends to various other women, and he had no doubt but that they could introduce the Sahib between them, especially if he would condescend to wear native dress and pose as "one from the North," which would account for the slight fairness of skin and also for any little mistakes of

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custom which might occur. He also suggested that it might be advisable to hire a room, away from his bungalow, where he could keep a couple of native dresses and make the necessary changes of costume without attracting the attention of the servants or others who might be watching his own place.

Meredith thought so well of this idea that he immediately authorised Ben Alif to hire, in his own name, such a room, and also to buy a few odd *dhotees* and other native garments which he judged might be necessary.

The dwarf set out at once to fulfil these commissions. On his way to a Parsee house-agent, as luck would have it, he passed the stand of the little *birri* seller, Sotoo Harian by name, who had inadvertently set the pariah on Meredith's track. He stopped casually and lighted a *birri*, and then suddenly bethinking that she might possibly save him a walk, asked if she knew of a vacant room anyway near. She replied instantly that there were rooms for hire in the house above her stand, where she herself lived.

Ben Alif thought quickly as to whether it would be most useful or dangerous to have the girl so near, and decided that it would probably be advantageous. She had seemed, ever since the night of her unfortunate speech to Aguf, morbidly anxious to do something to atone for her mistake. Besides, she had already, in the few weeks Ben Alif had

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personally known her, proved herself shrewd, willing and, above all, capable of holding her tongue, in one or two little matters which he had ventured to trust her with; they certainly had not been of much importance, but that was his business, not hers.

So, having made his decision, he went to the girl's old Hindu landlord and got a key to the only room vacant in the house, which appeared to be a regular old rookery, but little modernised, and occupied entirely by natives. The girl went up with him, leaving her stand in care of a friend, and carrying along a lamp, as the lighting of the place was of the very poorest description.

The room proved to be little better than a big oblong box with a closet at one end and an apology for a window at the other; the thin lath walls were covered with a cheap wall-paper which was duplicated in the clothes-closet. The girl entered this closet, and a moment later Ben Alif heard her knocking, apparently on its walls. He moved over and inquired what she was about. She held her lamp aloft and answered in a low tone, "*Derwaza hai.*"

He went in quickly and saw there was, or had been, as she said, a door, but it was now covered up very neatly by the wall-paper, and but for the most careful scrutiny would never have been discovered.

"Where does it lead, Beebi, and how didst thou find it?"

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She seemed puzzled a few moments, then told him to wait there with the light, and if he heard a knocking on the outer wall, to knock back gently. She left the room, and a few moments later the dwarf heard light footsteps running apparently up some stairs beyond the covered door, then came a smart rap a little to his right, and he rapped in answer directly on the door.

The girl was soon back, triumphant at her easy success, and she told Ben Alif that there was a passage and stairway from her stand connecting with a similar closet in her room—that that was the reason she had taken the room. The stairway was narrow and dark, but she could always slip up to the closet and back directly instead of going around to the principal entrance, which was on another street. She had often wondered if there was any other entrance to the passage, as the length of her room wall abutting it did not account for the whole length of the passage. She had made a chalk mark where the dwarf had answered her rap, and told him she did not believe any one knew of the second door —not even the landlord, who had bought the place within the last two years, while she had been there nearly three. She was also sure that there was no other door, for the second one accounted for all the space in the passage.

Ben Alif hired the room for a month and then later discussed its possibilities with Meredith.

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Provided the girl were thoroughly trustworthy, that passage would be invaluable, as otherwise it was bound to be noticed if a Sahib was often seen entering the place by the front doors. But if he could slip past the little cigarette girl and up to the room, he could there transform himself into a native and go out boldly by the front way without attracting the least attention from the floating population who resided there. As for the girl, he believed that if the Sahib would condescend he might easily win her favour by a little kindness. She was young, and—if he might make so bold as to judge—was in such a state of mind toward the Sahib that she would easily become a very valuable friend—that was, of course, if Hazoor did not think her too utterly beneath his notice.

Hazoor frowned at this, then laughed, but later acted circumspectly, and little Sotoo's attitude toward the new lodger certainly justified the idea that the dwarf was a very fair connoisseur in such matters, despite his ape-like appearance.

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CHAPTER XVII

MEREDITH was sitting out on his veranda a few evenings after his installment in the new quarters. He had already used the room down in Byculla, and managed to win his way into the good graces of the little *birri-wallah* by various small kindnesses and a certain chivalrous manner, so that he was free to step behind the awning that sheltered her stand and slip up the narrow dark stairs. The door had been opened into his room without any difficulty, and the room itself was equipped with everything he might find necessary, even to a *charpoy* on which he might spend a fairly comfortable night should he find it advisable. He had been twice into the fastnesses of Grant Road, and certainly had not been much encouraged by what he had seen.

The place seemed for all the world like a great rabbit warren—the houses for whole blocks connecting apparently by underground passages and cellars, and these cellars were the scenes of weird orgies by night and by day. There was a continual shifting crowd of fantastic shadows distorted in the uncertain and smoky light of the crude oil lamps

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that had completely bewildered him, and these shadows came and went, appearing and disappearing, noisy, obscene, riotous, like the delirious pictures of a hashish-eater's fevered dreams. Now for a moment some one face would impress itself on you from out the tangle, then in an instant 'twas lost, and you might search the whole night and never see it again.

Meredith was now waiting for Ben Alif, who was to escort him again to this place of evil later on in the night. The dwarf had intimated that there was to be an orgie of even more than usual abandon, and it was most probable that if Aguf the Red was indeed still in the city he would be a prominent figure at the night's debauch, which was to be of a semi-religious order—a sure guarantee of its profligate nature.

Meredith had heard of *Sakti-puja*—an ancient ceremony in honour of the wife of Siva—but had supposed it had been stamped out by the Government, as it was regarded by the English as revolting and brutal in the extreme, and even the Hindus—the more sensible of them—looked upon it as a horrible travesty on the spiritual idea from which it had sprung into existence. It was a debauch to the senses where Brahmin and Pariah merged their caste—where a Sudra was as great as a Cshatriza—and the senses alone, inflamed with *arrack* and *bhang*, were lords of the orgie. Occasionally

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the ceremony was reported from up country, in out-of-the-way districts, but that it should be attempted, even in a mild form, in a great city like Bombay, spoke volumes for the security of the dens where it was to be brought off.

While he was smoking and thinking out the possibilities of capturing Aguf, a faint and distant chanting, rising and falling on the cool evening breeze, caught his ear, and the next moment there came a great whirring of wings and the sky was heavily darkened with lumbering vultures. The chant grew louder, though its minor cadences were infinitely sad, and, looking over the cliff, he saw a strange ghostly procession wending its way, two by two, up a narrow ravine. It was headed by a bier borne by eight white-clad figures, and the chanting followers bore between each two a piece of white linen and stepped slowly to the solemn chant, while over and about them hung a cloud of vultures.

He knew directly that it was a Parsee funeral going up by the "Path of the Dead" to the dokmas, or Towers of Silence, at the top of the hill. Looking away there, he could see the great ghastly birds wheeling about the towers in expectant commotion, and also coming up out of the far distance. Meredith shuddered as the thought of their feast reminded him of the feast of the night to which he was bidden, and then he turned away and found Ben Alif crouched on the stone floor just behind him. The man rose

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and salaamed abruptly and then squatted silently again.

The procession had reached the top of the hill now, and stood silhouetted against the sunset sky, the white-clad followers swinging their linen strips and genuflecting to the crimson orb, chanting all the time; and then they passed out of sight into the gardens that surround the lime-washed towers, and the vultures sat waiting them, crowning the trees and the towers, a somber living battlement against the brilliant sky.

Meredith was keenly affected by the solemnity of the little scene. A strange feeling of loneliness fell on him as though it were some dear one of his who had passed into those silent towers to the keeping of their terrible wardens, and he turned to the dwarf and, with a gesture toward the far garden from whence the singing still fell—though very soft and mournful now—questioned, "Whither goeth he, Ben Alif?"

The dwarf, strangely enough, understood and was on the point of answering him, when a Moolah crying afar off from some minaret down below arrested him.

"*Illallaho—ho—ho—ho!*"

Faintly the cry reached them, breathing itself away yet fainter still, and Ben Alif looked up at the Doctor, and, deep down in his beard, gave answer both to him and to the Moolah's cry, "*La illah ill Allah.*"

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A couple of hours later, Meredith slipped under the awning of the little *birri-wallah* and up to his room, where Ben Alif, who had already preceded him, was engaged with various little pots of coloured paste and grease. He effected a change of clothing rapidly and with considerable deftness, and then Ben Alif called up little Sotoo, who was greatly delighted at the improved appearance of the Sahib, and set to work with skilful fingers to still further enhance the beauties of her new friend. A touch of vermillion and sandalwood ointment here, and just a suggestion of henna there, with a little more upward twist to the moustache and eyebrows, and a decidedly downward rake to the gaudy turban, and behold! a rather truculent and certainly devil-may-care gentleman, who, by the set of his *puggaree* and the shape of certain curiously embossed dagger handles lying among the folds of his *cummerbund*, was possibly from up country—probably from the Nizam's State—and surely not the kind of a person one would choose to pick a quarrel with!

It was a quarter after midnight when the two men made their way back of an old deserted cow-byre into an alley so narrow that they could barely walk two abreast. Had it not been for the moon, the place would have been quite impossible in its blackness, but, as it was, a faint reflected light broke up the blackness into patches. In one of these they came suddenly on two men standing well back

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in a doorway. Their clothes were of some dark colour that blended well with the shadows, and but for the moon they would certainly have escaped notice. Meredith, turning his eyes in that direction, started nervously, and Ben Alif cursed them uncompromisingly, and seemed inclined to give them a taste of his staff, but they slipped by, muttering surlily at his threats, and vanished behind the cow-byre.

The dwarf stood looking after them in a perplexed manner, and then, turning to Meredith, inquired:

"Now who were those sons of pigs, Thakur?"

"And how should I know, man? Probably some night-birds like ourselves."

"Night-birds, yes; but not like to us, Hazoor. Didst not notice the heavy footfalls?"

"Heavy footfalls! What the devil, man?"

"*Aie*, Hazoor; there's only one native in the city whose foot falls so."

"You mean——?

"Sepoys, Thakur," he answered laconically.

"*Tck! Tck!* What about a *Baboo*, oh, wise man? Does he not also wear boots?"

"Aye, Hazoor; but mostly patent leather or French kid which he buys at Crawford Market, and no such ox-carts as the British Raj supplies to the police department."

But Meredith grew impatient and shut him up testily:

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"*Arre*, Ben Alif, thy wits are over subtle to-night, and thou dost indeed cackle like an ancient hen who has retrieved her reputation with an egg."

"*Uccha*, Hazoor," the man growled, resuming the way again; but he cast a good many suspicious glances over his shoulders towards the cow-byre ere they arrived at the door they were seeking.

The dwarf proceeded to scrape with the iron shoe of his staff raspingly on the metal workings that studded the heavy door, and very soon a latticed window above was opened a few inches and a woman whispered down to them. The dwarf's answer was evidently satisfactory, for the window was closed and a few minutes later they heard the bolts and bars inside being removed and the door was cautiously opened wide enough to admit them one at a time into the silent house.

The sound of the refastening of the door had hardly died away when a figure stepped out of the shadows in the lane not a dozen yards from the spot where the two men had been waiting for admission. He was evidently, to judge by his dress, a Sahib, but strangely enough wore a soft slouch hat like a *padre*, and a belt about his white drill coat that held a big army revolver. He also carried a most suspicious-looking cane, and was altogether a very formidable person as he loomed big from the shadows.

Glancing up at the windows, this gentleman swore

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softly but with a certain fervidity that made up for lack of noise. There was a patch of moonlight across the window, and this was evidently not at all to the man's taste. He drew back to the wall and, reaching down into the dirt with his fingers, felt around till he found a piece of loose-lying string, which he proceeded to pull slowly till it grew taut in his hands. He gave three sharp tugs and then let it lie easily across one palm while he held it twisted tightly around the fingers of the other hand. In a moment there came a sharp tug that pulled his hand forward, then four more in quick succession.

After this strange performance the Sahib dropped the string on the ground again and stood watching the patch of moonlight as it slowly passed across the window in the wall above him. Five minutes later a stone dropped in the lane a little beyond him, and with a sigh of relief he stepped forward and stood in the better light beyond.

A couple of figures joined him instantly, and certainly Ben Alif would have had no cause to complain of the heaviness of their coming.

The Sahib drew them hastily into his hiding-place and they whispered eagerly together, studying the window carefully as they did so. They waited thus ten—fifteen minutes. The moonlit strip had dwindled now to a scant half-foot, and the Sahib had recourse to his string again—with very startling

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results this time, for the lane suddenly grew alive with stealthy, creeping shadows.

A little knot of men gathered under the window; two brawny ones braced themselves against the wall; another sprang quickly to their shoulders and yet another to his; then a slim young boy leaped up nimbly, topped them all, and reached the window, which, after a little manipulation with a delicate saw and a long, thin knife, opened silently and the lad stepped through. A stout rope, knotted every few feet of its length, was flung up to him, and in a short time he signaled that it was fast.

There was another whispered consultation, a quick tightening of belts and *puggarees*, and a dozen lithe, swarthy men followed the boy into the silent house, the last drawing up the rope and closing the window.

All had been accomplished with a celerity and silence that betokened excellent training—not a hitch or a jar had marred the whole proceeding, and when the window closed the Sahib drew back again into the shadow with a grim smile on his face. A *bandicoot* poked its curious snout out of a hole, and, seeing the land clear, went grunting about his business up the lane.

Meantime Meredith and Ben Alif groped their way after the woman who had let them in. Where they were it was impossible to decide after the first few steps, which were taken entirely in the dark; and

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twice, later in their devious course, the woman put out the little oil-cup lamp which she had lighted, handing Ben Alif the end of her *sari* to follow by, Meredith in like manner keeping touch behind him, the clink of her *nanparas* and the feel of her gown being all there was to guide them.

By and by, bidding them halt and not move till she came back, the woman left them. They stood quite still in the inky darkness, and as they waited there came a far-off smothered roar that died away rumblingly. They heard it again ere the woman returned, bearing a lamp, and beckoned them to follow quickly.

They came shortly on cross passages similar to the one they were traversing, and once to a door before which they were halted and where other men and several women in gala dress joined them; so that when they finally got within sight and sound of the revelry their party had increased to a good round dozen. These were lost almost immediately in the sudden turmoil of furious life which whirled about them as they entered the outer rooms.

Somewhere pipes and viols were screeching and tom-toms rattling. Coloured lights and torches were flaring, and riotous bacchanalian figures were swirling in the uncertain smoky light. Satyr-like men, flower-crowned and nude save for their brilliant coloured *langoutis*; and women, supple bronzes, matchless in form and colouring, with

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scarlet poppies and hibiscus flowers in their flying hair, leaping and bending and swaying, uttering passionate cries, now full in the glare of the coloured flame and anon lost in the thick wreaths of incense that clung raggedly about the rooms.

There were eight of these big low-roofed dens—cellarways surrounding and giving into a center one, where there was a great garlanded idol—an image of the goddess—and at her feet the sacrifice, a handsome girl, and an enormous *lotah* of *arrack*.

The girl acted as presiding goddess—or perhaps one should say demon—of the debauch, inciting the revellers to fury by her wild cries and wilder gestures, and you may be sure that the great jar of *arrack* acted as a very able lieutenant to her.

In one corner was a group who were fighting and tearing like hungry beasts over the remains of what had been a great feast. All barriers of caste and religion were down, and Brahmins, Sudras and Pariahs fought together over shreds of half-cooked beef, defying decency and the gods, while fierce-looking Mussulmans gnawed at the charred remains of the ever-accursed pig, cursing and reviling Mahomet for having held them from the dainty fare so long.

Copious draughts of the raw, burning *arrack* added continually to the universal frenzy, and above it all, swaying and bending through the swirling smoke, beautiful and terrible, was the nude form of the

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queen, dominating the riot with her fierce gestures and imperious cries; now leaping into the thick of it and striking right and left with a leather thong, and anon scattering flowers broadcast.

If Meredith had recognised the difficulty of his search for Aguf above ground on a previous night, he realised its absolute impossibility here; and he was fast tiring of the furious din when a woman—one of the dancers—flung a tiny ball of jasmine deftly and with a challenging laugh.

The scented missile struck him between the eyes; then another and a third, on the cheek, on his lips; and he sprang forward and pursued the laughing girl, half wrathfully, half in jest. His fingers had just touched the gauzy veil that served her for a *sari* when he collided sharply with another man, who was bounding with curious limping leaps to the inspiration of the music.

They both fell back, and then the native rushed at Meredith with a shrill scream and a wild waving of the arms; he closed with him, clawing and tearing, with probably no other reason in the attack than a crazy lust of fight born of *bhang* and *arrack*.

Meredith shoved him roughly away, but as he did so one of the fellow's hands caught in his turban and dragged it off. For an instant the sight of the hair on the Doctor's head seemed to almost sober the man; the next, to rouse him to a fresh fury.

"A spy! A spy! Kill the traitor! See his

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hair! *Marro! Marro!*" And shrieking, he rushed at Meredith with his ugly knife flashing in his hand.

Meredith met him with a long, straight drive, landing hard between his eyes as the knife cut the smoky air a couple of inches from his chest. The fellow shot back into the pressing crowd with a yell, and, the smoke aiding him, Meredith dashed aside, avoiding the first rush of the maddened mob and shouting lustily for Ben Alif.

Even as he called there rose a sudden added confusion of noise—shrill cries of "Police! Police!" and "Spy!" and "Traitor!" The Doctor stood still, bewildered. The music had ceased and women were shrieking in terror; harsh curses and the thud of harsher blows came muffled through the smoke, and then a loud cry near by: "Thakur! Thakur!"

Evidently there was another little game on, perhaps another spy, or—then he seized the situation: the police were on them!

He answered Ben Alif's hail quickly enough then, and the two made a dash through the first side room they struck—only to find the passage-way blocked by a dozen big Sepoys driving back the frantic, panic-stricken mob.

"Sahib," whispered the dwarf, dragging off his linen coat hastily, "do we go or stay?"

"Go, man; go!"

"*Uccha*, Sahib; quick; gather some torches while I talk to these children of foolish mothers. Stand

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here with the torches, Sahib; one for thee and one for me; and when I beckon, follow me quickly—ahead of these curs, mind, Sahib—ahead of them if we would get out."

He ran to the skirts of the crowd, which was raging impotently for lack of a leader, and forcibly dragged at the men and compelled them to listen to his words. Then two—three—a dozen—twenty—sprang away and groped for torches. And then there came a hurricane rush through the mob of their fellows, who gave way right and left from this new peril of flying fire, but, seeing their intention, closed in after them clamorously.

"Ready, Thakur?" cried the dwarf, as they broke through to the foremost rank of Sepoys, and when Meredith answered "Aye," he sprang furiously forward with a long, low dive.

A dozen clubs rattled on his back, but he was too low to be much hurt, and, catching the two center men round their hips, he lifted them high in his brawny arms and flung them forward on their comrades, and with a hoarse battle-yell bored in again.

Meredith was after him in an instant, smashing right and left with his flaming torches, and hard on his heels came the vile, unwieldy mob, frantic with exultation now, and impossible of control.

The Sepoys fell before their rush, bruised and burned, and by the time reinforcements came a

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great sweating, turbulent crew was in the passage between them and the two leaders.

Ben Alif's plan of getting the crowd between themselves and pursuit had been a touch of genius that was only equalled by his courageous method of carrying it to a successful issue, and when they saw the door leading to the lane standing open it did indeed look like a wonderfully easy thing for them; but as they passed through, things changed abruptly. A dozen men closed on Ben Alif, who led the way, and the attack was so sudden that they flung him over before he had time to give them any taste of his mettle.

Meredith rushed out after him into the arms of the Sahib who had had so long a wait in the lane, and the two grappled fiercely, till Meredith cried out in pain. "Damn it, man, let go; I—I—— Why, good God—Jansen! Let go, you damned idiot! I'm no nigger!"

Jansen relaxed his objectionable grip slowly as he peered in the other's face; he lifted from his head the fez Ben Alif had given him and gave a low whistle, then in a quick whisper, "Nigger with you, Doc?"

"Yes; my servant."

"Right. Wait! Hey you, Fuzdar Muffil; damn your silly eyes! Let that man go! He's no *bhudmash*, you soiled pig! Let him up quick, and get to that door. *Jeldi!* don't you hear the devils

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coming? They've given our boys the slip, damn 'em! Here you, Dhagma, take these two men safely past the guards—you know the word—and tell my *gharrie-wallah* to take them where they want to go and to get back here sharp or I'll kick his head off. Day-day, Doc; keep that hat on if you value your reputation. Ah! Quick, men; get it shut! Hell! Close in and give 'em the stick! Sons of pigs! Cow-eating devils! Look out for that *soor* with the knife. Damn! That was a near shave, Farahate. Now shove 'em back Good boys! In they go! Look out! Now, all together! In with the bar, man! Shove! Again! So! Good boys; got 'em back very prettily. Anybody hurt! Damn! Too bad! Ambulance, Abdar!—*jeldi*, now, *jeldi*, boy!"

So a handful of men under a vigorous chief drove back the rush and closed the door and barred it through the iron handle with a crowbar. A few were left outside, knocked senseless in the first savage onslaught by the Sepoys' clubs. These were bound hand and foot with their own *puggarees* and *langoutis* and piled away in convenient doorways till the men from the jail-wagon had time to look after them.

The raid was an entire surprise and a great success, for, although many undoubtedly escaped over the roofs and by secret subterranean ways, the haul of "wanted" men and women was tremendous.

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A round dozen Sepoys were badly hurt, and one, whose skull was cracked with a native *lotah*, died later. Eight women and three men were killed on the other side, and about a hundred more or less seriously hurt. More than seven hundred prisoners of both sexes were taken, most of whom, however, were released the following day with fines, as, of course, the real object of the raid was to gather in a number of notorious criminals who were suspected of having sought sanctuary there.

So ended the most determined and successful raid in the annals of the Bombay police, and to the credit of the Sepoys, they did not fire a single shot throughout the whole affair, though their opponents were easily ten to one, and armed, desperate men at that.

All the sky was paling in tender grays and greens, heralding the coming day, as Meredith parted from Ben Alif at his place on Avenue Wagram. The great dokma towers loomed ghostly and big from the garden beyond, and the ragged edge of vultures sleeping off their debauch still crowned them like a frieze against the sky.

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CHAPTER XVIII

MEREDITH realised that he would have to look elsewhere for Aguf when he had ascertained that the worthy had not been captured in the raid. Clearly the fellow would give Grant Road a very wide berth for some time to come. Ben Alif was of the belief that he had left the city, and that further search was useless. He based this opinion on the fact that none of the women with whom he was in touch had seen anything of the Pariah in several weeks, while there were vague reports that he had been heard of in Poonah, and again, in Madras; all of which, however, might have been circulated by the man himself. Strangely enough, Meredith was far from discouraged by either his own lack of success or the dwarf's pessimistic view; on the contrary, he was buoyant in the belief that he would succeed, not only in this, but in any other project he chose to undertake; but he told himself there was no particular need to rush anything, as he still had some three weeks for operations in the city before he took his little trip into Behar.

Now, two days after this, Abdulla's little son fell

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sick, and the man came crying to his master for help. Meredith was at first inclined to have the child sent to the hospital, but changed his mind suddenly at the last moment, and not only visited the little one in the servants' quarters, but had him removed into the bungalow, where he and Abdulla could watch the case more carefully. Just why he did this he was himself uncertain, but was vaguely conscious that there was a very sufficient motive somewhere. He believed that Loda influenced him continually, and, judging that her suggestions would be generally helpful despite her occasional attitude of antagonism, he acted on them blindly, with rarely anything but satisfactory results.

The case developed to diphtheria, and a certain professional pride, which had been dormant for long weeks, sprang into active life again as the little one came closer to the border-line beyond which lie the shadows.

He had operated twice, and now both he and Abdulla watched by day and night—the man, with a kind of awed wonder at the Sahib's devotion mixing in with his fear for the child.

As the crisis came on, Allan had a curious feeling that in some utterly unintelligible manner his own life depended on that of the child. He had imputed his interest at first to professional keenness, but as he watched through the long hours of the night—watched the faint breath fluttering back and forth—

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he realised a greater issue—one more far-reaching. Possibly the importance of the little life was exaggerated by the attitude of the *khansamah*, whose eyes seemed ever fixed on the Sahib's grave face, trying to read the outcome there. Now and again the man would bury his head in his *dhotee* and groan aloud, and the Sahib, despite all distrust, would speak gently and comfort him.

And then when the temperature dropped to 103° and the child slept, with a tiny bead of moisture breaking here and there, and a quiet though faint breath in place of the hot, strangled gasps—when, in fact, he knew the Sahib had saved his little one—the one white thing in all his life—he fell on his knees and caught Meredith's hands and covered them with tears and kisses. And then he went out into the dawn, and, looking away over the city to where Beebe Jan Street lay, he clenched his fists and writhed in impotent fury. Verily, intuitions are wise friends to the wise!

So little Yussuf Millik came up from the place of shadows slowly and as if with some reluctance, but he came nevertheless. And where before there had been great awe of the *burra* Sahib, there was now something else—born of helpless dependence on gentle strength and patience—a shy, childish coquetry that blossomed into a dominant, worshipful love.

And the little one was so naïve and sweet and unspoiled, so utterly and frankly sincere in his

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worship, that the Doctor must needs respond in kind; and often, in the convalescence so wearisome to an adult, such torture to a child, Meredith would sit by the little one and while the weary time away with games and stories, enjoying himself the wondering interest, keen delight, or doubt, that chased across the pretty, mobile face. And then perchance the child would grow drowsy and fall asleep with his little brown hand tucked away in the "Great One's." And the Doctor, while inwardly ashamed, perhaps, would sit silent and still till it pleased the little man to come back from the land of dreams and release him from his vigil.

And often the *khansamah* would creep to the *cheeks* outside and peer through at the pair as they played, or as the Sahib kept watch. And once he saw the "Great One," as the baby lisped of him, stoop and kiss the little one's brow, as he slept half in his arms and half on the pillows. Then Abdulla rushed away through the compound to a secret place that the bushes and tangled creepers shut in, and there in the shadows he wailed out the bitterness of his spirit, and then settled down to cursing the man in Beebe Jan Street and all his relatives—past, present and to come—in most fluent and artistic language, seriously and with somber purpose, mind you, without considering in the least the futility of harking back to the gentleman's great, great grandmother's uncle's wife's mother-in-law, and passing

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invidious remarks concerning her. This exercise really seemed to relieve him immensely; so, possibly, it contained virtues not apparent to the uninitiated.

As Yussuf gained strength again and was able to play about in the compound, Allan naturally saw less of him, but the youngster was encouraged to come in and talk to his father's master, whose interest in, and affection for, the boy was to some degree reflected on Abdulla. The paternal possibilities of the man had never occurred to Meredith, and when he saw the intense devotion that the fellow showed for the tiny sick mite of his own flesh it was a revelation. Since the child was about again, Abdulla seemed hardly willing to have him out of his sight for an instant, and the little one showed an equal fondness for the *khansamah*, who appeared to spend his every leisure moment out in the open air with the boy, carrying him aloft on his shoulders, soberly learning the games the "Great One" had taught him, or listening to the fairy stories that he had gotten from the same source.

Meredith watched them casually, and it occurred to him that in any blow he might strike at the man he would surely reach the boy, and the thought was intolerable to him; yet but a couple of weeks previous he had been determined to pay his debt to the man—whatever he found it to be—to the last farthing.

However, January was wearing away without his

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getting any nearer to Aguf and the moonstone or to a settlement of his relations with Abdulla, and yet he felt quietly confident of clearing both these things up before he and Nicholas left Bombay on the second of the coming month.

He had visited Loda several times since the night on which he had dominated her so curiously and told her the story of the White Rose. He had left her that night sleeping under strong suggestive influences, but the next time they met there had been not the slightest hint in her manner that she suspected anything unusual had occurred between them. He had asked her advice concerning the lost talisman, but she seemed somewhat lacking in interest about the matter. They had indeed stood together before the great crystal and seen many curious pictures, which, however, seemed to have small bearing on their quest. They saw Abdulla with little Yussuf in his arms; the man was kissing the little one, and had tears in his eyes which the child was striving to wipe away. Then came Sotoo, the *birri-wallah*, and smiled out of the mists in the most bewildering manner; and, finally, the limping reveller who had attacked the Doctor at the *Sakti-puja* scowled at them savagely for a moment and was gone. These and more curious things they saw, and were much perplexed as to their meaning—but of the moonstone, nothing.

As a matter of fact, Loda was not at all herself

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these days, and if the crystal owed any of its potency to her magnetism, as many said, 'twas not to be wondered at that the pictures were vague and inconsequential. Her power of divination was well-nigh gone, and with it her confidence. The gods were working *their* will and she was helpless before them. She told herself with a curious apathy that it didn't matter, after all; that if she only sat still and ceased from striving there would come to her—what? Something she had dreamed. The Heart's Desire? Yes, that was it. She felt vaguely that the change in her was due in some manner to Meredith; she realised his influence strongly at times, but it never occurred to her that he was exerting it consciously or that it was directly responsible for her almost somnolent attitude. She would lie for hours up on the roof among her pillows and flowers, dreaming, dreaming, dreaming, and the White Rose and Soondai, Goonarthi and Lalkura, all seemed to blend together harmoniously, and at times the Heart's Desire drew very near. But the dreams pass; the noises of the bazaars, which had faded away thin and far, grow insistent again; the White Rose and Goonarthi flee away; even Soondai and Lalkura grow dim and shadowy—and left, are only Loda, the Witch. Yah Mahommed, and a cold, perplexing doctor-man.

One night in the last week of January, Allan Meredith halted at the stand of Sotoo on his way

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down into the bazaars. She beckoned him excitedly, and when he drew in behind the awning, whispered, "Upstairs, Sahib; upstairs!" and fairly pushed him before her. He unlocked the door of his closet and the two stepped into the dark box. As he was about to strike a light she stopped him with a whisper.

"Better not, Sahib; darkness is our best friend to-night. No, stay right here, and speak low."

"What is it, Beebi? What is it, child?" he asked gently.

"It is *he*, Sahib."

"Not——?" Her hand closed on his mouth quickly and he felt her little fingers tremble.

"Yes, Sahib; the Red One! Hus-sh! No names! The walls are like paper. In the very house—the room beyond mine. An *ourat*—a Sidi woman—hired it two days ago, and then he came."

"But, Sotoo——".

"Ah, Sahib, do not doubt; there isn't time. I make no more mistakes. See, he has shaved off that ruby beard and is letting the stubble grow black, and the sores on his leg are healed; but I knew him, Sahib, by the scar on his neck where his old *ourat* bit him through the night he killed her. Ah, Sahib, I knew him well—the beast—for he has pestered me. See, I was not sure at first because of the beard and strange clothes; but I saw the limp of the leg where the sores had been. Still I could not be sure, and

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he lay very close, so I bored a hole through the laths in the night—while he was out and the *ourat* slept—in a corner of the beam, Sahib, where it would not be easily seen. Then I lay down to sleep, but by and by awoke at the sound of the voices of those two in the room beyond, and I rose up quickly, and lo! it was he. He was sitting just beneath a lamp close by, and I saw the scar on his neck, shining where his ugly beard had covered it before."

She had spoken in an almost breathless whisper close to his ear, and she was fairly shaking with excitement when she finished.

Meredith spoke reassuringly to her, but ended with a note that set her a-trembling worse than ever.

"The gods are good to me," he said, "and I will send this limping devil down to hell."

"Oh! oh! Not by thyself, Sahib. He is an evil beast. Oh, Sahib, call the police." She put up her hands imploringly, and there was a quaver in her voice that in his interest at her tale he missed.

"Police!" he answered scornfully. "I come of a race——" Then he stopped, confused, and changed his sentence. "No, Sotoo, thou dost not understand. This man is my creditor—I owe him a heavy debt, and I want no police mixing in with my methods of payment. Now show me his room, child."

"I will not."

"What, thou——! Then I will even go alone. Make way."

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"Nay, my lord, be not angry with thy servant. I did but look to thy welfare. See, let us go reasonably and I will surely guide." But there was a wary note in her voice and she drew slightly away.

"I tell thee, child, I will see him face to face—the hell-hound!—and with my own hands send him out!"

It was very dark in the closet and Meredith paused a moment for her reply. There came a slight grating sound, drowned, ere he had fairly caught it, by her voice: "Hus-sh, Sahib! Ah, didst thou hear anything?"

"I—I—— No. What is it?" he answered, confused.

"Hush," she whispered back; "stand quite still." And he stood thus till there came a sudden flutter of the girl's drapery in the darkness beyond him and then the stirring of a draught of cool air.

"What is it? What——" He advanced his hands gropingly and his fingers touched the door as it closed in on him, while the next instant the key grated in the lock with a sharp snap.

He recognised that he was fairly trapped, and swore softly under his breath, then gave a little half-vexed laugh which the girl on the other side of the door heard and responded to.

"Sahib, forgive me," she whispered. "I am *bhud-mash*, but I—if thou didst get hurt again I—I should die—and—Sahib, I am too young to go to Yamma yet."

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"What art thou going to do?" he demanded sternly, ignoring her pathetic little attempt at coquetry.

"I am going to visit Aguf."

"Thou silly child, he'll eat thee up at one gobble. Come, let me out. See, Beebi, I will forgive thee and kiss thy pretty eyes if thou wilt be good and open the door."

"Nay, Sahib," came back a dignified little voice; "thou wouldst not care if the beast did eat me, and I—I do not need thy kisses, and will not open."

"The devil!" he muttered; then, in a harsh, threatening undertone: "Then I shall break the door, and when I get out I shall have thee sent to the *jail-khana;* so, mind—I have warned thee."

"*Ohie*, it is fairly strong, this door; and also, the door of my stand is stronger still, and has iron bolts. Besides, of what use? I shall see this Aguf long before thou canst break out—that I swear—and if I go to Yamma, thou wilt know that thou didst send me because of a stubborn whim."

"Thou dost talk like a fool, Sotoo," he snapped angrily, but there was a little weakening in his tone; for the girl's threat was evidently seriously meant.

"Aye, my lord," she answered quickly; "and thou wouldst act like one did I not prevent thee."

He kept silent, thinking hard for some plan to circumvent her, and she in a moment added:

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"See, my lord, I would not anger thee; and if thou wilt pass thy word to take Ben Alif, the dwarf, into thy counsel, I will open and show thee how to trap this beast; but if not, I will surely go now at this very time and stick my knife between his ribs before thou hast the chance. That is a last word of mine, Sahib; do thou give me thine."

And Meredith, touched despite his annoyance, answered: "Open, then, thou pretty *bhudmash*. I give my word."

The key grated on the instant and the door flew in; there was a whirl of light and drapery, and the girl was at his feet crying for forgiveness.

"Sahib," she whispered, "I have planned it all, and even prepared the way. The Sidi is always on the watch, and I should judge she loves him; but, Sahib, she loves *arrack* better. Twice has she slipped to my room when he was out and would have drunk like a pig had I given to her. So what easier than for me to bring her to the room again and let her drink, and when she grows drowsy, pass the key out to Ben Alif, who will open the door and pass it back to me. I will return it. Meantime, thou and Ben Alif are waiting in the closet. After a little she will return to the room drunk, so that thou needst not fear; she will sleep till he comes and then open to him as usual. That is all, Sahib."

"Hum, and suppose she comes to the closet?"

"There must be a little room for the gods in all

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things, Sahib; and should that happen—— Well, you are two big men and she is but a small woman. When she is quiet—thou seest I have thought it all out—thou shalt slip into my room, and Alif shall bide there; and when *he* knocks, Alif shall open to him from the dark so he may not see who is there, and thou and I, Sahib, will creep behind him lest he should suspect and try to get back, and—— Are there any more flaws, Sahib?"

"No, Sotoo; thou hast planned this thing well, and if Ben Alif thinks well of it also, it shall go as thou hast said—save only that thou shalt not come out from thy room with me."

"Thy word is my law always, Sahib," she answered docilely, but Meredith remembered the little matter of the closet, and determined to keep a sharp watch on the girl, that she took no chances.

It was too late to attend to the matter that night, much as he would have liked to, as it would need some considerable discussion of detail with Ben Alif ere they could hope to carry out the plan to a satisfactory conclusion—and Ben Alif might be anywhere between Dadur and Colaba at that time of night. So he told Sotoo to leave word with Selim for the dwarf to be at his bungalow early the next evening, and that she was to prepare for their coming later the same night, and in case any obstacle rose he would send her word by the dwarf before eleven o'clock.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE next day chanced to be Thursday, on the night of which Abdulla took his weekly holiday, and as usual Meredith dismissed him directly dinner had been served. The man placed the tobacco and coffee on the table and then hung around the room, putting this and that to order, and seemed several times on the point of speaking; once, in fact, as he stood behind Allan's chair, he cleared his throat to attract the Sahib's attention, but Meredith sat engrossed in thought and the fellow drew away again and finally went from the room. As he left the compound, his dejected attitude—so different from his ordinary swagger—attracted even Meredith for a moment, who wondered somewhat vaguely where the man's usual sprightliness had vanished; but the subject of the evening's work soon drove the *khansamah* out of his mind.

Ben Alif came early and Meredith took him into the library, and after carefully fastening the shutters, the two went over the situation carefully. The dwarf was not quite so optimistic as the Doctor about the matter. "Aguf," he said, "was no chicken, but a wily old bird with all his tail feathers

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—the very worst pirate in Bombay—and he must be feeling absolutely secure or he would never risk staying in the city." This should warn them, at least, against expecting too easy a capture. If they once got in the room with him, he was willing to admit that the rest would be easy. There was a stable close at hand, kept by a friend of his who would keep Aguf in seclusion for as long as he, Ben Alif, proposed. Selim and Rhamin, and perhaps Ager Jan, would wait in the street while they transacted the business privately with Aguf in his room; then the three men would bring a strong sack and tie the gentleman up and remove him quietly to the stable like a bag of feed. It might be necessary—as Ben Alif judicially observed in conclusion—to turn the man over to the police later, but it would certainly be best to keep them out of the matter till they themselves had at least got on the track of the man's employers—if not, indeed, till they actually recovered the moonstone—as it was quite unnecessary to attract attention to either the Sahib or the talisman at this particular time, when so many thousand eyes were already on the lookout for a sign of the coming *avatar*.

At half-past ten they left the bungalow and started off down the hill. There was a man watching the road a couple of hundred yards down, and at a nod from the dwarf he followed them at a distance, and in Belassis Road he was joined by another.

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Ben Alif stopped casually at Sotoo's stand to light a *birri*, and as the girl held the light she whispered hastily to him, and he in turn beckoned to Meredith. After a covert glance around, the two slipped back of the stand, through the narrow door, and waited on the stairs for the girl. She followed almost immediately, and told them in a hurried whisper that the man Aguf had not gone out; that he had fought with the Sidi woman the previous night and she had run out into the bazaar screaming and had not returned; and that the man was sitting up in the room now, smoking and drinking. She had watched him for half an hour through her peep-holes, and he seemed very restless, and watched the door continually as though expecting some one.

Meredith asked her if she thought the Sidi woman knew who the man was, and Sotoo seemed to think she did not, as she had spoken to her several times while she was drunk, about her lover, and she had not given the slighest suggestion of any such knowledge. The girl proposed that they now go up to her room and see for themselves how things stood and then decide what to do.

This met with their instant approval. Meredith sat on the stairs and unlaced his shoes, and then followed the other two barefooted ones cautiously up to the room. It was quite dark when they crept in, save for a tiny glimmer that shed through the girl's peep-holes from the room beyond.

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They stood silent, hardly breathing, in the middle of the dark room, listening intently for any sound, Then suddenly they heard heavy irregular footsteps cross the floor to the room beyond, and the creaking of the window shutter. That broke the spell instantly, and Meredith stepped silently over to one of the holes.

The man was out of sight when he first looked—there being a corner of the room in which the window was set—but after a moment the shutter jarred again and, with a low muttered curse, the man came stumping back with the lamplight shining full on his ugly face. Meredith stood fairly rooted to the floor staring half fearfully at the face. Where had he seen it? Just lately, somewhere—that brutal face. Where was it? Or had he dreamed it? And then it came sharp-cut and clear, and he wondered how he could have forgotten it for even an instant—the night of *Sakti-puja*, and that awful brute coming at him with those beastly, leaping limps! He looked again, closely, as the fellow lighted a *birri* at the lamp, and saw with some satisfaction that his eyes were puffed and discoloured.

He was just turning away to whisper this news to Ben Alif when a quick movement of the man he was watching held him. The fellow had started up suddenly while lighting his cigarette, and held himself set, listening intently. After a moment he set the lamp down and, creeping over the boarded

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floor, crouched at the door with his ear to the keyhole.

Some signal too low for the watchers to catch evidently passed, for the man whispered back and then drew a key from his *langouti*, turned it in the lock and opened the door.

The man's shoulders hid the newcomer from Meredith, though he caught sight of a *puggaree* above the Pariah's head which showed him that it was not a woman, as he had expected. Then Aguf moved aside and Meredith saw *Abdulla Millik* standing before the closed door.

He set his teeth hard, and a certain fury at the traitor rose up in him and almost choked him. He sat down on the girl's *charpoy* to recover himself, but the blood ran to his head hotly. He had been almost sure this fellow was false, yet, somehow, lately, the intensity of his resentment against the *khansamah* had languished; but now—but now—— He clinched his teeth savagely, his interest in the Pariah lost in his sudden furious hate of this other man. The one was a professional Ishmael who lived up to his calling; the other——

And then the picture of the child—little Yussuf—who had called him the Great One and loved him simply, rose before him and halted his hate, as it were.

And at that moment Ben Alif leaned over from where he was squatted on the floor watching, and

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gently scratched his foot, bringing him to quick attention again. He rose up and listened. There were voices speaking beyond there—muffled, 'tis true, but with words and sentences sometimes distinguishable just the same—and he returned to the hole in the wall and watched and listened intently.

Aguf was sitting on the *charpoy*, while Abdulla was standing in front of him like a schoolboy at a task, and looking about as uncomfortable, under the other's questions and suspicious scrutiny. Aguf was evidently dissatisfied with the answers, for he suddenly jumped up and laid his hand on the other's throat roughly, drawing his face close and snarling out at him: "See to it, Abdulla Millik; see to it! Ten days thou hast had the powder, and I saw the Sahib alive and well this day—curse him! —and thou comest whimpering here about a feigned sickness — that the man would not eat nor drink save what a *hakim* ordered! I think thou liest, and if thou dost—*Tish!* thou art too much of a cur to trifle with us. Gods, I would tear thy heart out and then make this Sahib eat of it! See to it, I tell thee, Abdulla! We are patient men, but there is an end to all things. Thou hast two more days, man, and then——"

He flung him away, and Abdulla staggered to the couch, his *puggaree* all awry and his face gray with fear through the brown. Aguf stood looking down on him with a face of brutal scorn; but he was

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evidently not quite satisfied that the man had lied, for he asked suddenly: "Who is this new *hakim* thou dost speak of? His name; what is it?"

Abdulla choked over his answer, but got it out at last: "Nicholas *ke nam hai.*"

"*Tlc! Tlc!* Nicholas *ke nam hai,*" the other whined mockingly. "Yes, I have heard of one with that name, and he may have need to take medicine himself soon! Does he eat with thy Sahib, Abdulla?"

A fresh fit of shivering seized the *khansamah* at the insinuation of both tone and question, and he shook his head miserably.

"Come, how long has this new *hakim* been treating the Sahib? and for what sickness?" were the next questions, and the way they were put gave one the idea of a cat playing with a mouse. But presently Abdulla got over some of his shaking, and perhaps a little of his fear, for he grew sullen and snapped his answers back—when he made them at all—surlily; for it had occurred to him that this Aguf and those back of him needed him too much—at least, until he had finished the work they had set him—to harm him.

Aguf seemed a little nonplussed at this change of attitude, but after a few moments began to bluster more than ever, calling his victim by seemingly every foul name in the vernacular. His ferocity was beginning to affect Abdulla, despite

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that gentleman's recent philosophy, when his persecutor gave a sudden start and stood listening.

There came a sharp, peculiar sound from the pavement outside and below the window, such a sound as might be made by the contact of a policeman's stick with the stone flags. After a long breathless pause the Pariah crept over and lowered the light very slowly, then cautiously drew near the window, opened the shutters a few inches and gazed out.

The road was empty, and the pavement beneath; but there was a street lamp on the corner whose light cast a number of strange oblique shadows over the sidewalk. These Aguf studied with painful fascination, gradually opening the shutter more and more in his eagerness to find out the cause of those distorted black patches which trembled and moved with the flickering of the lamp in the wind, and again seemed to move curiously of themselves. Shortly one of the shadows changed into better focus with the light and resolved itself into that of a *puggaree*-clad head, the same *puggaree* being of a shape that was especially objectionable to Aguf and all of his clan. Then another shadow detached itself from the general unintelligible design, a huge hand—badly out of drawing, 'tis true, but quite unmistakable—grasping what looked very much like a Sepoy's club. Finally, having decided that there were a round dozen native policemen standing

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backed up against the wall of the house, he began to cautiously draw in his head, when something in the shadows of the opposite pavement attracted his gaze, and, looking closely, he discovered the white helmet and uniform of a European inspector, who appeared to be staring straight at him. For an instant he was dazed and nearly lost his presence of mind; then he realised that it was quite probable that the officer had not seen him, as the lamp was very low and placed in a corner of the room well away from the window. He drew himself slowly and cautiously away, leaving the shutters open, and then stood in the dimly lighted room, thinking hard.

Abdulla watched him fearfully, not understanding in the least what the trouble was. He saw him go hastily to the closet and, after some fumbling, come out with some strange-looking keys and wires. He examined these an instant, went swiftly toward the door, and then spun round sharply as Abdulla rose up and whispered hoarsely behind him, "What is it, Aguf?"

That whisper came well-nigh being Abdulla's last. Aguf had, in his sudden danger, utterly forgotten his guest, who was sitting in the shadow on the *charpoy*, and the simple question startled him terribly. He stood glowering at him for an instant, and then a new thought seized him that filled him with fury. "Ah!" he cried in a fierce whisper.

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"Thou! It's thou, eh! Traitor! Well, fool, pig, thou shalt go first, at any rate."

His knife was out, and he sprang across the room at the *khansamah*, who fell back away from the long-sweeping blade with a wild shriek of "Police! Police!"

The blade caught Abdulla's turban, ripping through it and gashing the man's cheek but missing the vital point, and ere Aguf could strike again there was a sudden clatter of heavy boots on the pavement outside and a sharp order came in Hindustanee: "Up you go, men. Quick! The devil's there as sure as death!" And then followed a shrill, wailing cry of a woman: "Aguf! Aguf! *Kabardar, kabardar*, police *hai!*"

Then a shout followed by harsh curses: "Catch her, damn it, men; she's got the door bolted! Smash it in—get y'r shoulder to it, Ja Singh!" And then a woman's shriek again, as of mortal fear and anguish: "Aguf! Run, Aguf, run!"

Aguf waited for no second blow at Abdulla, but opened the door of his room hastily and, not even waiting to lock it behind him, turned to the door of little Sotoo, his next neighbour. He was cool now that he knew the worst, and worked with his skeleton keys with a calm precision that was wonderful. He heard the door below give in with a crash, and the wild screams of the woman rang out again to her lover as she fought tooth

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and nail at the broken door to give him an extra moment.

Meredith and Ben Alif had been so taken aback by the rapid action of things in Aguf's room, by the sudden appearance of the police on the scene, and the shrieks of the woman, that they had barely got their wits together when the door of the room they were occupying pushed cautiously in and the figure of the Pariah stood silhouetted against the dimly lighted corridor.

The man paused on the threshold, peering into the inky blackness of the room suspiciously, some psychological instinct warning him of a new danger; but strain his eyes as he would, he could see nothing of those tense, waiting figures.

The woman's cries had ceased. There came a heavy tramp of feet on the lower stairs, and Aguf stepped in—to his fate.

Even as he stooped to fit the key on the inside, Ben Alif reached out of the blackness and caught him in a terrible strangle-grip, bending him back across his shoulder and crushing his throat like an egg-shell.

"Quick, Sahib; get Abdulla out!" he whispered back to Meredith as he made through the door with Aguf's quivering body in his arms. And Meredith, understanding, followed him instantly.

As luck would have it, the *khansamah* had just gained courage to come out into the corridor, and

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Meredith grabbed him and dragged him back into Sotoo's room before the fellow realised what had happened.

Meantime the men were coming up the stairs in a mass, none of them very much liking the job. They turned the second landing, got well on the stairs, and then they liked it less than ever; for, even as the leader raised his eyes, some shapeless mass came hurling through the dim light and swept him off his feet before he could even cry out. And as he fell, so fell they all; with a terrible bumping and cursing and groaning the narrow stairway was swept clear, and in the sweeping the only light they had was struck from the wall. When they picked themselves up, bruised and scared half to death, they made a clean bolt down to the front door and dashed ignominiously into the street. Later a light was brought and the furious inspector led them up the stairs again.

On the first landing they found the Sidi woman crouched on the floor, tearing her hair and beating her breasts over the dead body of her lover, Aguf the Red.

A crowd gathered at the outer doors—and among them were Meredith and Abdulla, aye, and Sotoo and Ben Alif; and when the irate Sepoys dispersed the crowd, these drifted away with them.

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CHAPTER XX

As happens often in life, so it was with Abdulla Millik; out of the blackest moment of his not over-luminous career sprang suddenly his greatest opportunity. When he escaped almost miraculously from the knife of the Pariah, only to fall into the hands of his own master, it did indeed seem as though the gods were serving him a rather scurvy trick. Meredith had hurried him down the narrow back stairs to the *birri* stand where Sotoo was already reconnoitering; here followed a rapid bandaging of the wound, to which the *khansamah* submitted sullenly. The game was up, and he didn't care very much now how things went, his chief feeling being one of relief that there was nothing as bad as murder against him. And then a great light broke on him that nearly dazed him.

Meredith, seeing the sullen gloom of the man, had taken quick pity on him. Had he not brought the police and risked his life in that last interview with the Pariah rather than sacrifice his, Meredith's, life? Aye, he had seen the horror in the poor fellow's face while Aguf was discussing the deed. That the man was under some great bondage there

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could be no doubt; and anyway, that he had repented and risked his life at the last moment for him was enough for the Doctor; so he had spoken gently to the man, with his hand on his shoulder.

"Come, boy, I am not thy foe. Thou hast acted foolishly to-night; I could have saved thee without all this fuss with the police. Still, thou didst bring them rather than sacrifice me, and we will let it be so. But thou must trust me, Abdulla. I need thy friendship and service; so let there be an end to-night to aught else between us."

Abdulla gave a little choking cry, and would have dropped on his knees there in the *birri* stand, but Meredith caught him quickly.

"Not now, Abdulla; we must get away. Come; keep close to me and don't look so infernally scared."

As he followed behind his master and Ben Alif during the walk up to Wagram Avenue, Abdulla gradually recovered his nerve and his capacity to grasp the situation. As a matter of fact, he had been as much disconcerted by the advent of the police as was the defunct Aguf; their presence was due beyond a doubt to the Sidi woman, whom Aguf had tired of and thrust out; that she had discovered the identity of her lover, betrayed him in a fit of jealous rage, and repented when it was too late, was perfectly clear to the *khansamah* once he had touched the leading threads; and the only thing to be

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considered now was how he, Abdulla Millik, was to profit best by the Sahib's evident mistake.

Upon due consideration he determined that the Doctor Sahib was far from desiring any police interference in his private business at this juncture, and would be very unlikely to inquire too particularly as to where they got the information which led to the raid; therefore, he would be fairly safe in retaining the credit which the Sahib had thrust upon him. Indeed, as he recollected, he *had* shouted lustily for the police, and they had immediately responded by rushing the house—which would be an incident very difficult to discredit. But back of all this tortuous reasoning lay a great desire to truly serve the man who had won the love of little Yussuf and his own gratitude.

True enough, he would have poisoned the Sahib according to orders if he had been pushed into a corner; he might—probably would—have made a fight; still there is little doubt but that he would have done the deed when once assured that his own skin depended on it. But now there seemed a possibility that it would serve that precious skin better to throw in his lot boldly with his master. He had vital information which he could supply—which his gratitude desired him to supply if he could only be certain that the Sahib and his friends were able and willing to protect him.

The sudden death of Aguf had impressed him

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tremendously; the Pariah had been an important factor in the campaign against the "Mark"—the trusted lieutenant of the man in Beebe Jan Street—yet a horrible fate had tripped him up and flung him out of the game, despite all the *jadoo*-makers and star-gazers—despite a thousand potent incantations and all the wisdom and strength that lay back of the enemies of this same "Mark."

What, he demanded mentally, was to insure him, Abdulla Millik, against a like fate? And—ah! what was to insure the man in Beebe Jan Street? He pondered this, rolling it over in his mind like a savory morsel on one's tongue. If such and such did happen, and the credit for the happening attached itself to him, Abdulla, why then—then——

His mental excursion ceased abruptly at the gate of the compound, where Meredith turned to him and asked kindly: "Abdulla, dost thou wish to talk with me this night, or to-morrow? Choose thine own time, man, and remember that I trust thee; but if there is work to be done we have little time, for three days hence thou and I will leave the city."

"Thou wilt take me, Sahib—after to-night?"

"I have told thee I am thy friend, Abdulla, and, for the child's sake, as well as thy work to-night, I shall forget all I have heard and seen except only that which thou desirest to tell me again. I shall protect thee at any rate, and for thy safety it is best for thee to go with me."

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"Sahib," the man answered in a shaking voice, "behold, I will set thy coffee and tobacco, and when thou art ready to hear, I will speak truly unto thee even though thine anger shall slay me, and may the spirit of the child whom thou didst bring out of the shadows sit betwixt thee and me and listen to the words of my lips."

Ben Alif had been standing a little aside in the shadow listening to every tone of the man's voice. When the *khansamah* had finished speaking, he moved forward with a little grunt, nodding his head at Abdulla; and, salaaming to Meredith, he said:

"Thy course is wise, Hakim, and were best followed out betwixt thee and him alone. I will be at thy service by noon to-morrow if such be thy desire."

. . . . . .

An hour later Abdulla had told his whole miserable story, extenuating much and lying a little, after the inevitable method of his kind, but, on the other hand, yielding to the emotion which the Sahib's generosity had called up, and eagerly pleading for a chance to show his gratitude.

The story began, like most such, with a little debt to a *bunnia*—money borrowed to help pay for a *tamasha* on his marriage night. The interest soon outgrew the original principal, and the toils closed hopelessly round the careless, irresponsible debtor. He realised his position when the *bunnia*

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stepped in and threatened him with the *jail-khana;* all his little household goods and chattels were sold, futilely it appeared, for he was in no way better when they were gone. His wife was with child and fainting for lack of a little rice to sustain her. And then, you see, this foolish fellow didn't need much, but he took an unwise way of gaining that little. He broke into the *bunnia's* house in an effort to get back the notes he had given and the wherewithal to feed his wife. Of course, he was caught red-handed, but his very audacity saved him from jail, for the *bunnia* not only relieved his immediate wants, but promised to get him employment; all this with a condition, of course—that he should serve his creditor as a spy.

It seemed an easy way out of a dark place and Abdulla had jumped at it thankfully. The criminal charge and the debt still hung over him, with his own signed acknowledgment of both safely locked in the *bunnia's* safe, but, provided he did as he was bid, they would never be used against him. The services demanded at first were few and simple, and then, as he performed them easily and satisfactorily, he was given others more intricate, some of which would have brought him into uncongenial relations with the police had he been detected, but the *bunnia's* methods were wary and his servants profited by them. Then came his position as hospital *hamal,* with strict injunctions to watch the students for

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one with a birthmark in the form of a circle on the chest.

He could not say why the man with the "Mark" was expected to appear in a hospital, but he did know that each hospital in the city had its spy, and that every doctor in the district was carefully watched—probably by the direction of the *jadoo*-men and star-gazers.

He told how he had seen the mark on the Sahib that afternoon when Nicholas Sahib had called; and declared, tearfully, that only fear of the *bunnia* had made him tell the matter, and that when his report resulted in the attack by Aguf he was more terrified than ever.

The attack by the dog was smoothed over by a lot of plausible lying. He had thought the Sahib a stranger, as had the dog, and when he saw the Sahib's face under the turban and remembered that he was the "coming man," he was so terrified that he let the dog slip out of his arms and ran for his life. He swore that he had crept back a few minutes later and had seen Ben Alif talking to the Sahib and so knew he was safe, but had not dared to confess the matter in the morning, so great was his dread of the man he had betrayed.

Thus through the whole story—truth cleverly interspersed with plausible lies—till he came to the illness of his child, and told of his receiving from the *bunnia* direct a powder to be placed in the Sahib's

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coffee. He vowed he never intended doing it—and Meredith after his night's experience not unnaturally believed him—that he had accounted for his tardiness in obeying orders by the fact that his little one was sick and would die also if the Doctor died before it was cured. This had served awhile, and then he had lied and declared the Doctor was sick himself and attended by another physician. After awhile Aguf was detailed to see that he performed his work, and then he took the desperate course of giving up Aguf to the police and confessing the plot to his master.

It was skilfully told, and the man's genuine sincerity—his eager desire to be as true as he dared—backed by a curious, almost reverent, affection for little Yussuf's saviour, which shone in his eyes and shook his voice, all these were dominant and overcame the occasional false note which might otherwise have been detected. In short, Abdulla, swayed by many emotions that night—by a dark, tortuous heredity which had left him superstitious, timid and utterly selfish—by a strange and unaccustomed sentiment of loyalty and gratitude which he trusted very little more than he understood—swayed so, and judged by the light that guided him, his concluding appeal to Meredith was a fair commentary on the course he had pursued.

"Sahib, I have spoken. As Allah has made me, so I am; as He shall help me, so shall I be."

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Meredith answered him by a little gesture of the hand, then sat thinking, his face set and hard, while Abdulla crouched on the rug beside his chair, watching now and again from the corner of his eyes the stern face of the Sahib.

At last the Doctor spoke, quietly, almost casually: "And this man—this *bunnia*, Abdulla—what is his name?"

Abdulla had felt that the question would surely come and as surely must be answered, but he balked a little and a shiver ran through him. It was the crisis; once that name was spoken his last hold was gone. The man in Beebe Jan Street was a realised evil, while the Sahib at best was but a potential good. Still the choice had been made already when he told his story, and as he could not mould circumstances himself, 'twas perhaps as well to let Allah mould them for him. So he moistened his dry lips and, rising to his knees, whispered the name close to Meredith's ear.

"Juggi Bim Chundra," Allan repeated in a ruminative tone, and then added: "Ah, yes; a soft, fat, oily Hindu; with little, cruel eyes; with pouches—heavy pouches—under them; with a wheezy, unclean breath; a gross paunch that overhangs his *cummerbund;* and—chill, flabby hands, with jewelled rings sunk deep in the flesh of his shapeless fingers. Abdulla Millik, I think—I judge—that is, speaking as a doctor, I would say, that this Juggi Bim

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Chundra would do well to set his house in order, for his heart is weak and will fail him suddenly and soon."

The *khansamah* was still on his knees, gazing in startled terror at his master, who sat with his eyes closed and his knees crossed, speaking with a lazy, indifferent drawl. The man could have screamed aloud as Meredith drew that portrait with seeming lack of care, yet with consummate skill, touching on the things that told, emphasising them, and leaving blank the rest.

"Thou hast seen him, Sahib? Dost thou know him?" Abdulla gasped at last.

"Nay, boy, I have never seen him; thou thyself didst suggest the picture in thy story; I have but expressed it in words."

"But, Sahib, 'tis the very man, and I—I—and the end, Sahib, of which thou didst speak?" There was a blending of anxiety, fear and hope in the voice which questioned.

"Thy wits seem strangely slow to-night, Abdulla; did not thy story suggest the end of which I spoke?"

But Abdulla could not do aught save shake and gasp, and the Sahib added quietly: "My diagnosis is rarely wrong, as thou wilt find, Abdulla. But pshaw! man, brace thyself or—— Eh! What!

He caught the *khansamah* quickly as he fell forward, propped him against his chair, and then went

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to the sideboard and poured out a liberal dose of whisky and put it to the man's gray lips.

"There, there, swallow it down, boy. Oh, the Prophet be damned! Do as I bid! It's medicine. There, that's better—and you can charge the whisky up to me in your prayers."

The man came round quickly under the stimulating effects of the liquor and was soon apologising for his lack of manners in rolling over in the presence of the Sahib.

Meredith hardly wondered at the man's sudden weakness, considering the strain he must have been under for some time past and the dramatic conclusion of it on this night. He would have sent him off to bed but that he was most anxious to clinch every bolt possible while Abdulla was in this repentant mood; not that he feared he would turn again, but that he might strengthen him in his new attitude. He recognised that most of the miserable luck and consequent actions had been caused not so much by inherent vice as by cowardice. Fear seemed to have dominated his life—fear of Fate in a thousand shapes—and Meredith saw that the best way to make the man of any use whatever was for himself to take the rôle of Fate and prove to his servant that it was beneficent.

His first act was to question him regarding the coming of the "Mark"; what he had heard; what he believed; what he knew. Then he proceeded to

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tell him guardedly something of the vast influence which lay behind the cause; mentioning, among others, Loda and Yah Mahommed; and, be it remarked, this was the first time on which the name of the old Moslem had ever passed his lips, yet he now spoke of the man's wonderful power to the awestruck servant as though thoroughly acquainted with his life.

It proved a wise course, for Abdulla was visibly affected by the knowledge that Yah Mahommed was *for* the "Mark," while the combination of Mahommed and Loda seemed to him encroaching on the power of Allah himself. He slowly but surely lost his craven look, assumed a firmer, more confident bearing, and even questioned the Sahib intelligently at some points in the long talk that followed; and he accepted the part allotted to him almost with pleasure—a part, by the by, which would have chilled him to the marrow had it been mooted before he had understood in what potent company he would be working.

He fairly swaggered through the dawn to his quarters with much of his old-time manner—the manner that had so often belied his shaking heart. Arrived at his door, he turned and shook his fist viciously down at the town below and muttered:

"Aye, Juggi Bim, thou hadst indeed better set thy house in order; for verily thou art very sick."

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CHAPTER XXI

THE next day was a busy one for Ben Alif. After a long talk with Meredith at midday, he started off on a dog-trot toward Dadur. He made occasional detours before he got into the suburbs, stopping here and there in some of the lower native quarters and holding short whispered conversations with various men and women, none of whom were likely to be mistaken for either prosperous or virtuous citizens. He finally arrived at Mahommed's Rest; but instead of going into the compound, as was his wont, he loafed around among the little population beneath the walls. His hurry seemed to have ceased, and he smoked and cursed and sprawled in the dust with the laziest good-for-nothing of them all. Once in awhile he would get into an argument with some one of the men, and these would end in a short struggle, in which Ben Alif was naturally an easy victor, though to a close observer these struggles were not as desperate as one might have expected from either the conversation or the looks of the combatants.

As a matter of fact, a quick exchange of whispers went on in each case between the exaggerated

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spasms and gaspings. But if the quarrels were open to suspicion, the way in which the vanquished man got up out of the dust snarling and vowing he would have a quick revenge was absolutely perfect. The fellow would then get over by some crony of his own, and, with many black looks at the dwarf, whisper and mutter and perhaps let another into their confidence. Then the three would slink surlily away and Ben Alif would jeer and curse after them.

The dwarf seemed to be very quarrelsome that afternoon. Five men had left the little colony, and another, the sixth, started also, though without any apparent cause; and to this, strangely enough, Ben Alif objected so forcibly that the fellow dropped back in the dust again with ill-disguised anxiety. Later, another rolled away and had almost gained the corner of the wall before Ben Alif caught him. This fellow showed fight really, but the dwarf flung him back into the bunch of wondering beggars with a snarl, and bade one of them to tie the couple who seemed so anxious to leave the company, with a pair of *cummerbunds*, and see that they tied them tight.

Finally, at five o'clock, about an hour and a half after the men with whom he had quarreled had decamped, Ben Alif's hurry seemed to return suddenly, and after a few words with one of the men he started back for town.

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Just about dusk another beggarman arrived from the direction in which the dwarf had gone and entered into an excited conversation with several of his fellows, who, after listening, began to prepare for a general exodus.

There was a girding of loins and a binding of rags; *lotahs*, old bottles, pipes, and a dozen other such valuable articles, were gathered and strung dangling to their various *cummerbunds*, while a profusion of knives and ugly looking clubs made a sudden appearance. Even the dogs bestirred themselves, stretching and snuffing and leaping about in anticipation of a change.

The two bound men watched the preparation with stolid indifference until a couple of big, hulking fellows proceeded to truss them up more securely. They protested, but a few severe kicks showed them that docility was the best course. They were finally gagged with great wads of rags rolled tight and forced between their teeth, after which their jaws were firmly bandaged. Thus, helpless, they were hoisted one at a time by the fellows who had bound them, carried down the road a short distance, and dumped unceremoniously into a convenient ditch.

And then, as the night fell, the whole villainous crew went halting and floundering away, with their rags flapping and their *lotahs* and bottles and pots jangling, and their dogs leaping and yelping before

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and behind; and one heard the din of their going echoing faintly long after the kindly night had shut them out of sight.

Now one of the unfortunate gentlemen left in the ditch managed, after much gagging and straining, which came near dislocating his jaw, to work aside the bandage covering his mouth, and later to disentangle his teeth from the wad of dirty rag which had been forced between them. The first use he made of his free jaw was to curse his comrade fluently, and for a time with much patience, for getting them in such a mess; but the monotony of wasting his efforts on a man who could not stimulate him by returning his compliments finally grew oppressive.

Evidently the other man was gagged tighter, or his jaws were not so adaptable, for his only response to the most insulting vituperation was a shiver and a choking gasp, which, while suggestive, was not satisfying.

The first beggar pondered awhile, then, with much difficulty, got his body into a sitting position, the narrowness of the ditch aiding him materially. Having succeeded, he immediately rolled over again sideways, thus gaining nearly half his length and falling on top of his companion.

He now proceeded to drag himself up the other's body by the aid of his fangs fastened in different parts of his brother's rags. It was slow progress,

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and the under man struggled frantically, evidently under the impression that he was about to be murdered.

By and by the man with the free teeth managed to get them in his brother's jaw-bandage, and after a few minutes' chewing tore it away, together with the wad, from his mouth. The under man immediately utilised his liberty by snapping viciously at his liberator's nose. There were prospects of a merry fight at this, but in lurching back from this sudden attack the first beggar rolled from off his comrade's body.

They spent the next fifteen minutes getting up into sitting positions, and once this was accomplished the second beggar showed his gratitude for his friend's help by paying back with interest the debt of curses and insults which had been heaped upon him while he was helpless. Number One listened with attention and evident interest till his brother paused perforce for lack of breath, when he himself joyfully took up the refrain once more.

Finally, it struck him that if one bandage could be eaten, others might be also, and he immediately broke off in the middle of a scandalous tirade against his comrade's grandmother and set to work on the elbow knots of the descendant of the objectionable old lady—the said descendant cursing him steadily all the time he was working.

It was ten o'clock when they clambered out of

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the ditch, and after stretching and rubbing their cramped limbs they started hurriedly for town.

At about the hour these two left Dadur, Abdulla Millik knocked at the door of a house in Beebe Jan Street. He stood in a small, badly lighted vestibule while the servant who had admitted him passed out of sight through several rooms to announce his coming. Abdulla listened intently till the sound of the man's steps grew faint, then turned swiftly to the outer door, opened it, and admitted several men who slipped past him like shadows and disappeared behind the folds of the heavy tapestry which shut off the first room from the vestibule.

The Hindu servant returned shortly and beckoned Abdulla forward, and with a sympathetic shake of his head whispered that he was afraid his dear friend Abdulla had chosen an unfortunate time to visit his illustrious master, as he was almost beside himself with rage and grief over the loss of Aguf.

Abdulla, who seemed duly alarmed at this prospect, had barely passed through the second *purdah* when he heard something fall heavily in the room behind; then a cry, smothered in its beginnings, reached him. He smiled a little as he recollected the half-gloating sympathy with which the Hindu had just favoured him, and went on his way with considerably more confidence.

He was evidently well acquainted with this house,

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for he turned suddenly at sight of a half-open door and crept cautiously down the passageway which led to it. The door opened to the kitchens, and Abdulla carefully counted the number of servants working there over their pots and pans. He gave a sigh of relief after the count, and then slowly and silently pushed the door to inch by inch, locked and bolted it, secreted the key in his *cummerbund*, and went on to his interview.

He drew back a *purdah* at the head of a short flight of stairs and stood in the doorway, bowing.

Juggi Bim Chundra was sitting on a broad divan with pillows heaped about him—a fat, flabby, unhealthy Hindu, about sixty years of age. He was smoking a *narghyle*, and the unwieldy fingers which held the jewelled mouthpiece shook nervously, probably as a result of the half-emptied brandy bottle that stood on a tabaret at his elbow.

He greeted Abdulla with a snarl, and dropped the mouthpiece of the pipe in the greeting; it fell among the cushions, and he sprawled, grabbing for the gemmed toy like some hideous gorged vulture, then, regaining it, glared savagely at Abdulla again.

"So thou'st come, eh, pig—son of a pig; thou hast come, eh!"

"I have, my father," answered Abdulla, with humility and unconscious repartee.

"Well, fool, thief, speak out! What hast thou to say? Is it done, or must I——"

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"My father, it is done," Abdulla's voice broke in solemnly.

"Ha-a-a-ah! *Ca bolta tum?*" He slowly straightened up with a long-drawn gasp of incredulity and questioned the man in broken syllables, leaning forward with fat, bulging eyes in which wonder and fear seemed equally blended. "What—what sayest thou?"

"*Such hai—such hai*, Rao-Sahib; *it* is done."

"Sh-s-sh, fool! Not so loud! Come closer; there, sit thee there, and whisper. Now, is—has—that is—— *Paf!* Is the man *dead?*"

"Aye, my father; he is dead—this five hours gone."

"Hus-sh!" the *bunnia* hissed out, looking around fearfully. "I—— What's that? Ho, Lal Sing! Didst hear nothing, Abdulla, my son? Where didst thou leave Lal Sing? In the kitchen? Ah! I thought I saw the curtains move. Sh-s-sh, Abdulla; come closer, man, and whisper low. My nerves are all ashake. I dreamed of—of Aguf last night, and he stood right there, back in the shadow of those hangings."

Abdulla shuddered and looked fearfully over his shoulder.

"And he cursed me—even me!—and I have been as a father to him—and he said that—that I must die—I, mind, who have been so kind. What? What didst thou say?"

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"Nay, I did not speak, my father."

"Why didst thou not, fool! Nay, Abdulla, I meant it not. Thou art wise and cunning. Tell me now, what thinkest thou of this dream?"

"Nay, my father, I am but a fool, as thou hast spoken, and no reader of dreams; but there surely is a time to die, and perhaps——"

"No, no, I tell thee it was but a drunken dream! I loved him as a brother—even as I love thee, Abdulla"—the little fat eyes leered with horrible suggestiveness—"and when I heard the news, I drank—brandy; not wine, but naked brandy; and then I slept and dreamed, and woke sweating with fear and drank again, and now thou comest with thy long sour face and thy solemn 'it is done'—curse thee! Nay, Abdulla, I meant it not; we must be friends, thou and I—— Eh, wilt drink, man? I—— Where's Lal Sing? Curse him, why does not the son of a cross-bred pariah dog set my mattress? I would sleep!"

"I will even call him, my father," answered Abdulla, rising.

"Nay, wait; let him be. Sit thee down and tell how it went. Art sure that—that—— Quite sure?"

"Aye, master, it is surely true; *Sahib margya hai.*"

The Hindu sat awhile blinking and pondering over this matter, with now and again a quick, shifty glance at Abdulla, who sat cross-legged and solemn

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before him. The room was dim and shadowy save for the spot where the two men sat. This was lighted from above by the soft rays of a great octagonal lamp, but neither this nor the curiously inlaid silver hand-lamp which stood on the tabaret beside the spirit bottle was enough to clearly define the further hangings of the room.

By and by Juggi Bim Chundra leaned cautiously toward Abdulla, pausing a moment with a fat finger to his flabby lips ere he spoke; then he whispered hoarsely:

"How did he go? Speak, man; did he pass in sleep, or how?"

"He was awake, with staring eyes and gasping breath," came the answer quickly in a dull monotone.

The Hindu reached quickly for the bottle at this, and, tilting the neck toward his lips, let the liquor run down his throat without polluting his mouth with the touch of the glass—for this Juggi Bim was a very scrupulous observer of caste. Then after another pause he questioned again:

"Wah! wah! And then—did he speak? Was he conscious at the end?"

"He spoke, yes, but whether he was conscious I cannot say." And Abdulla shuddered as if at some fearful thing.

"What ails thee, man?"

"Ah, this Sahib was good to me, my father; he saved the child's life, and I—I——"

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"*Tlc! Tlc!* thou fool! It was thy skin or his. But what did he say? Did he suspect?"

"He spake strange words, and whether he suspected or no I cannot say, but he gazed deep into my eyes and whispered, '*I will surely come again.*' That was all, my father."

Juggi Bim's jaw dropped slowly as he leaned forward listening to Abdulla's slow, impressive words, and there was a frightened catch in his voice as he asked:

"What did he mean? Can the dead come again?"

"I cannot say, Rao-Sahib, what he meant, unless—— Nay, I cannot say."

"Unless what? Speak out thy mind, man!"

"Aguf came again," Abdulla faltered.

"Aguf! Aguf! 'Twas a dream, I told thee!"

"Ah, yes, I remember. I thought perchance it was a ghost that had disturbed thee so; but if thou art sure——"

"Sure? Sure? What meanest thou, pig? Curse thee! Get thee gone with thy long face and croaking words, thou silly son of a she-ass! 'If thou art sure' indeed! Get thee gone, I say!"

And Abdulla wisely retreated.

But Juggi Bim was far from sure, despite his bile, and after Abdulla left he had recourse to the brandy once more.

Under its quickening influence he shook off some of his fear and began to ponder what Abdulla's news

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meant to him. Fifty thousand rupees of blood-money was due him, with an extra five thousand on delivery of the moonstone crystal—not a bad haul for one transaction, even for him—and as he pondered it he began to glow with satisfaction. And then he scowled as the thought of his instrument, Abdulla, crossed his mind. The fellow plainly had some sentiment about the late Doctor Sahib; that made him dangerous; yes, and he knew too much! . . . Well, he would settle once for all Abdulla's business in a day or two—so that he might join the master he was so fond of.

He chuckled at this last witty thought, and, rising, crossed the room somewhat unsteadily, then, lifting the *purdah*, listened with a cunning light in his eyes. The house was quite silent, and forgetful of the fact that his servant had not been to him, he shut the door, locked and bolted it, and then went over to the farther wall and lifted the heavy hangings.

There was a click in the wainscoting under the pressure of his fingers, and, setting down the lamp, he thrust both hands under the tapestry and drew out a little sandalwood box. He opened it evidently with pleasant anticipation and drew out something that glittered brilliantly in the lamplight. It was the yellow pearl-rimmed moonstone.

He touched it gently, patted it, and smoothed it caressingly, then, with a low, fat chuckle, lifted the

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lamp and moved it back and forth, taking childish pleasure in the flashing rays which the crystal gave back to the light. And then he stopped suddenly, with both arms still raised; the fatuous smile stiffened on his face for a moment, changing gradually to a look of fear.

What was it? His glance crept slowly and fearfully over his shoulder. He had heard the tapestry rustle, and then a sigh—surely it was a sigh! He came right around, faced about, with the lamp still raised, peering with bulging eyes and gray, twitching lips into the far shadows.

And as he gazed, something white and luminous detached itself from the darkness; and in the gleam of the lamp it took form and shape of a man—a native in sumptuous dress—whose robes glowed and glimmered with a strange unearthly light.

The *bunnia's* breath came in short, wheezing gasps as he backed step by step before that awful august presence till the wall was reached and stopped him; and then he began to crawl sideways, like some great bloated crab, but ever with his eyes fixed and staring dreadfully. And step by step that great light-clad figure followed on, till with sudden courage born of sheer despair the Hindu held his going and the figure halted, too.

A full minute the two stood thus face to face—a horrid Fear and a dreadful Might; and then there came again a sigh like to the one that had first

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startled the man, and this, as the other, seemed to fill the tapestries with a curious rustling echo. Later a voice, cold, distant, infinitely sad, broke the silence:

"Juggi Bim Chundra, thy cup is full, and thou must even drink and go hence."

And the *bunnia* found his voice whimperingly: "My lord, I—I—— Who art thou? What have I done? Lo! I am a poor man and full of years."

And the low, even voice answered: "I am Rama Lalkura of Bhaitypore, and by this sign on my breast and that which thy fingers hold thou shalt know me."

Slowly the stranger drew aside the flap of his breast-coat and bared his chest, and there, pulsing with the same curious light that shone from his robes, was the strange mark, the sign which in all the land was looked to with superstitious awe—a very, golden moon!

Again came a sigh, and a rustling echo which was half a sob ran quivering round the tapestries in the far dimness of the room.

"Mercy! Mercy! I will repay," shrieked the wretched man; and the answer leaped on his words in quick scorn, then sobered to cold monotone again:

"Canst pay back the blood and tears—the agony and shame? Nay; I am neither judge nor executioner, but a messenger sent to take thee hence to where thine accusers wait. Haste! Thine hour is come."

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The figure seemed to the *bunnia* to expand as it came toward him, and the phosphorescent light to glow hotly. He struggled to move, to defend himself, made a desperate effort to scream and to fling the lamp at that awful doom which was closing on him, but his cry weakened to a barely audible groan, his arms dropped suddenly, his whole body sagging and swaying for an instant, and then down he went crashing to the floor, his face striking hard on the polished boards. The crystal shot from his loosened grasp and fell at the very feet of the stranger; but the lamp in falling broke, and the flame leaped quick to a near rug and caught at it hungrily.

On the instant, as the white figure stooped to lift the crystal, the tapestries behind him flung back and four men sprang into the room, led by Ben Alif, who caught the burning rug and would have cast it on the still figure lying limp and pitiable now, but the stranger suddenly lost his dignity and sprang nimbly forward between the two and with a fierce gesture stayed the dwarf.

"Let be; who art thou that thou shouldst slay him?"

"Thakur?" gasped the man, holding off in sheer surprise.

"Aye! Are thine own hands clean? Quick! Leave him, and get out. He was my enemy, not thine—and I choose to let him have his chance."

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"*Uccha*, Thakur; but the tiger who has bit will bite again."

"Not this one, I think. But hurry, man; where's the cloak? Here, take this *puggaree*—now the coat! Quick! Thy cosmetics and washes worked like a charm, but this phosphorus reek offends me. So; that is better. Now the key—in his *cummerbund*. Here, you, Abdar; come back, you villain! If a thing is gone from this room I'll flay thee alive. See to thy men, Ben Alif; we are no *bhudmash choars*. Now, then, hurry, man; out you go. Leave the key on the inside—— Ah, what's that?"

The whole party halted on the stairway outside the room as a dull, confused roar reached their ears, apparently from the street.

"What is that, Ben Alif?" repeated the now rehabilitated Meredith.

"Sounds like a fight, Sahib; but I've got enough men around the house to give a good account of any accursed meddlers that come along. The devils are itching for a fight, too."

"But what about the police?"

"Yes, I know, Sahib; but my beggarmen will stand even them off for a few minutes, anyway. This way, Sahib; we can't chance the front door."

They ran down the passage to the door leading to the servants' quarters, which Abdulla had shut earlier in the evening. It was open, and a man was guarding it, while others were crouched

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just inside the kitchens, where they had tied up the servants.

Abdulla, who was in charge back there, ran to meet Ben Alif as the latter came to the doorway.

"What is it, man?" asked the dwarf.

"They are fighting in the street outside, and these" (pointing to three men behind him) "say that the Chucklas of Juggi Bim are out and filling the street—they ran in hither to warn thee as thou didst order."

Ben Alif nodded and quickly gave his orders. Posting a man at the door to open when all was ready, he formed the rest close around the Sahib, with stern instructions as to his master's safety. "Now, then, close up! Let go, Abdar!" And as the door flew open, out they rushed, a compact wedge, into the narrow court behind the house—the big vicious-looking pariahs fairly carrying the Sahib.

They got to the corner of the main street without being observed, but here their way was blocked by the fight, and the Chucklas were between them and their own party. They halted, turned about, and started for the other end of the alley; but a cry went up even as they turned, and a moment later they were driven to the wall, fighting desperately.

For a few minutes it looked bad, as they were hemmed in the narrow way, with no chance of their friends in front knowing of their predicament, let alone helping them out of it. So it seemed to

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Meredith, who was jammed against the wall with never the slightest chance to strike a single blow; but he heard Ben Alif's voice rising above the fury of the fight like a great, hoarse fog-horn, and wondered why the fellow wasted the breath he seemed likely to need so badly, till by and by there came from the distance a faint echo of the dwarf's roar and he began to understand. Five minutes later and there was a rush in the court behind them; then a dozen wild, tangled heads topped the wall and the owners leaped down into the mêlée.

The first batch received a warm reception, but others came leaping in in an apparently unending stream, till the lane was a mass of fierce, writhing, blasphemous devils through which Ben Alif's party slowly and with many a halt for attack and defense forced a way to the corner, where reinforcements of lusty beggars were waiting to carry them triumphantly through. In a side street a *gharrie* was waiting; and after seeing Meredith and Abdulla safely off, Ben Alif rushed back with his men to conclude his little business with the Chucklas.

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CHAPTER XXII

Of all the beautiful provinces of India, Behar, to my mind, is the most ideal, stretching away as it does from the everlasting snow-topped hills of Nepaul to the far plains of Gya, with the Bhagmati, the Gunduch, and half a dozen other rivers watering its fertile soil; with its great jungles, the home of the tiger, the elephant, the Himalayan bear and the ubiquitous pig, to say nothing of more prosaic game; and these wild jungles, alternating with vast cultivated tracts whose golden billows of grain roll undulating away to the sacred Ganges. There are countless villages dotted among plantain groves and surrounded with rustling rice. Great patches of brilliant green—indigo—in well-kept boundaries, refresh the eye; and well-built government roads leading to important indigo factories and connecting "stations" destroy the sense of loneliness in this gracious, green solitude.

In one of the prettiest nooks imaginable, with its single bazaar fronting an extensive lake, stands Motihari, the principal Station of the Chumparun and Bettiah districts. It would require a stretch of the imagination to call the place a town. It has

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one long row of quaint little stalls or shops of the usual bamboo-and-mud order, a few *puka* houses standing back from the charming lake, a jail, a church (without a pastor), a bunch of court-houses, and last, but by far most important, the Planters' Club. This is a delightful, low, rambling building, with wide verandas and a great shady compound that slopes away to the lakeside, where the boating, fishing and bathing are excellent.

This club has a worldwide reputation for hospitality. It has rarely more than fifty paying members at a time—which is about the total of the European element in the district—and yet at a race meet on the *maidan* past the opium *godowns* there are liable to be a couple of hundred vociferous Anglo-Saxons yelling wildly for their favourite, while the club dances are renowned for their show of beautiful women. On any of these occasions, a race meet, a cricket match, a pig-sticking contest—whatever may be—little peaceful Motihari blossoms like a rose; is transformed into a bustling, hilarious pleasure garden. A city of snowy tents rises as if by magic, filling the compounds and overrunning to the lakeside. Dainty ladies trip through the curious bazaar, lie in hammocks in the shady verandas, and at night dance to the strains of the military band that the Colonel at Segowlie always sends. Even His Highness, Runjit Bohe, comes at times with his brother and friends

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from the palace at Bettiah and dances and flirts with the best of the young Assistants. Such is Motihari.

There were numerous tents already up in the club compound on the first of February, a kind of aftermath of the Christmas season; the several residents' houses—*puka* stone buildings—had also their quota of guests, who had come apparently from the ends of the earth. A well-known London barrister was there with his daughter; other people, from Calcutta and Bombay, from Agra and Delhi, and the Lord only knows where else.

Most of them had declared their intention of staying through February to see if there was any truth in the garbled stories flying around concerning a possible revolution in Nepaul. Here in Motihari they were close on the border of that mysterious little kingdom, and having nothing better to do, were watching it with a good deal of natural curiosity.

It certainly was a fruitful subject of discussion in the club-house; men laid bets on all kinds of possible eventualities, as they chalked their cues or watched the game in the billiard room—that Rama Lalkura was a fraud and would be wiped out before he got any fun for his money; that the whole business was a hoax of the priests of Pashupati to draw a big pilgrimage; and there was lots of even betting that, hoax or no, Khatmandu would

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not miss the opportunity for cutting the throats of its present rulers and substituting others.

McKenzie was lying in a cane chair out on the veranda, drinking gin fizz and listening to a man from the "mess" at Segowlie, who, being in close touch with the native troops under him, was liable to be reasonably close to the heart of the matter. This man was gambling freely on Lalkura coming to time, and told many curious stories of the preparations made by the Nepaul Government to stop him from getting into the country at all—as it was supposed he was coming from the outside world.

McKenzie was skeptical but evidently interested, especially in the news of the closing of all passes and the heavy reinforcements to the garrison of the already impregnable Bhimphedi.

"Well, but how the deuce are the pilgrims going to get in, Major?" he asked at length.

"Oh, they'll let 'em through all right, you can bet on that; but every son-of-a-gun will have to strip to the waist and run the gauntlet between half a score of government agents, to show that he has no birthmark on his chest."

"The devil you say! And what about the North?"

"Yes, of course that's the rub—and it's just that which I'm gambling on! Suppose his royal nibs comes from Persia, or Afghanistan, and through Cashmere; who the devil's going to stop him? There are more than a hundred thousand men

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waiting for him up there, and it's an easy gamble they'll push him through."

"Yes, my dear man, that's all very true; but what makes you so cocksure there's any such chap to push? They said he was coming several times before, I've heard, but the duffer never materialised, you know."

"Yes, I know about that; but mind you, Mac, those other times the people in the know stopped all preparations for his coming nearly six months before he was due; and to-day, you'll remember, is the first of February—giving him just twelve days! And, far from the engagement being cancelled, the passes are shut as tight as a drum, while they tell me that nearer seventy-five thousand pilgrims are making for Pashupati than the usual twenty thousand who turn up. Now, what d' y' think they're coming for? . . . The Ganges at Benares is a damned sight better river than the Bhagmati at Pashupati, and handier, too, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"Oh, well, Bewloe, allowing that's what they're coming to see, that's no reason that they'll see it! What do *you* say, Donovan?" said McKenzie, drawing another man, who had just come out, into the conversation.

"Well, I don't know, don't y' know; but I've heard a queer story to the effect that that rum Mussulman chap, Mahommed what's-his-name, is coming to take a hand in the muss if there is going to

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be one; and they do say that he's a remarkably good guesser, y' know."

"Whew! Who told y' that, Charlie?"

"Oh, a chap wrote it from Calcutta. And say, you fellows, this is quiet, but this man suggested that His Highness of Bettiah is mighty thick with the Mussulman."

"Rot!" commented McKenzie, briefly.

"Now, who's cocksure, Mac?" questioned Major Bewloe. "See here, man, that just fits in with a thing I happen to know at first hand, or, at any rate, second—got it from Lurderdale, the Resident at Bettiah, y' know—that this Mussulman—Yah Mahommed, his name is—will be a guest at the palace this very week, and that Runjit Bohe is considering an invitation to stay the rest of the month up in the hills at Mahommed's place, a regular fortress with a queer name, which I forget. Now, Lurderdale hinted to me that at any other time he would have encouraged Runjit's visit, as the Moslem is a wonderful man and hand-in-glove with the Government *wallahs*, but he had heard that the old gentleman—he's about twelve hundred years old, y' know, if reports are true—had made some sort of compact with Khatmandu to hold the northern passes for them, and he thought, as he was responsible for the Maharaja, that he'd better advise him to stay home. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

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"Well, I'll be damned! Eh, man, and here I've bet thirty rupees with that silly fool Barclay that the thing dies of dry rot! Oh, well, pshaw! I don't believe it yet! Who is this doddering old Mussulman, anyway? I've heard of him as a crack-a-jack of some sort, of course, but I didn't know he trotted in harness with Rajahs and things."

"Call Harris. There he is, saying day-day to Mrs. Kitty. Hey, Billy! Come over here and foregather with the rum! . . . Say, old man, Mac here has been referring to a certain Mohammetan we know as a 'doddering old Mussulman.' I don't want to talk, because he thinks I'm prejudiced already. Go on, Billy; drink and spout!"

"Who d' y' mean? Not the Wandering Jew?"

"Exactly."

"Why, what's he been up to now?"

"Coming up to Bettiah in a couple of days."

"What!"

"Sure enough; stopping with His Highness."

"Well, well, well! The hoary old pirate! Why, Major, if that's quite correct, there's going to be a lively time away over those old cocoanut trees; and I never tumbled to it! Gad, what an ass I am!"

"Say, Major, kindly stick the neck of that bottle in his mouth; perhaps it'll make him a little more lucid. I'm not big enough or

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I'd do it myself." This from McKenzie in a very aggrieved tone.

"Well, you know, Mac, old Mahommed's an awfully hard kind of a chap to talk lucidly about, anyway. He plays off his own bat all the time, and you never know what he's been up to till you see the score-card. All I know, from actual experience, is that he is a kind of middle man between the Empire and the Buffer States. I happened to be mixed up in one or two deals myself, and so came in touch with him. What? Is he straight? Oh, I don't know; he's an Oriental, and I suppose they've all got a twist; but if he ain't straight he's clever enough to make up for it, for he certainly is a very wonderful man. He seems to be acquainted with every language under the sun—yes, and every philosophy. He's in with the priests, too, and I have heard that he is learned in Yog-Vidya, and can travel about in his 'astral.' This may sound like awful josh, but once, when I was up in Khelat and much in need of some practical advice, the old gentleman walked in on me. I was so delighted to see a man with brains that I forgot to inquire how he came without being announced. He settled my business in an easy casual way, smoked, and talked of things of mutual interest, and finally asked me the way to a certain house in the bazaar. I walked out with him and pointed it to him and then we parted. When I got home I saw my serv-

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ant looking very curiously at me, and asked him what was wrong, and he in turn asked me if I was sick, as he had seen me walk out of the house talking to dim air and also gesticulating.

"Well, I threatened and swore, but the boy stuck to it that no one had either entered the house, or left it with me. He declared that as I had walked up the street two other men also had observed my curious manner, as though I was indeed conversing with some friend. Not wishing to have a reputation for foolishness up there, I had to drop the matter. The next time I saw Mahommed and questioned him, he declared laughingly that I must have been asleep and dreamed the whole business, for he certainly had not been in Khelat within the last twenty years! That's gospel, boys, though I still believe there was a string somewhere."

"Great Lord! Give the man some more rum and then pass it over here. Do you stand for that yarn, Major?"

"No, sir; you can't drag me in!"

"All right; go ahead, Billy; only, tell us about a time when you were sober—drunks don't count."

"Very well, Mac; I'll talk down to your level. A few years ago we were having a whole bagful of trouble with the hill people, as you probably remember, the Brahnis being particularly active. Of all the bold, bad scallawags that ever rushed a raid, they're the worst! I know 'em well, because

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I was up North there trying to straighten things up. Of course, you know our policy is conciliatory rather than reformatory; that is, I give 'em a knife to cut your throat on provision that they don't cut mine. I had almost unlimited credit from Calcutta, but at the end of six months I had to give it up and skedaddle. They had made seventeen different agreements regarding boundaries, which were solemnly signed, sealed and delivered at Calcutta, and seventeen times they deliberately broke every article in each of those agreements; and finally, finding they had got about all I had to give, some six hundred jangling, rattling, daredevils of horsemen formed an escort and rushed me down within easy ride of Quetta. There we halted, and they rode rings around their leader, Izak Abdar Khan, and me, yelling and volleying their *jazails*, while Izak solemnly presented me with the magnificent Baluchi mare which I was striding, together with her trappings, in memory of my *pl-eas-ant* little visit, and invited me most cordially to return and visit them again—when the British Raj had some more wealth they wished to bestow on their very loving friends, the Brahnis.

"I saw Izak doing police duty around Quetta three months later, with his Brahnis careering about and choking off all the other Hillsmen. He grinned broadly when I expressed my surprise at his occupation, and shrugging his shoulders,

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said it was the will of the Just Lord, Yah Mahommed.

"Well, you know what they've done, Mac—given us the finest service imaginable for nearly ten years, just because your 'doddering old Mussulman' held up his finger! And mind you, I wasn't the only one who'd had a shot at 'em. Fredericks had been up there, and Campbell, and they'd been as badly fooled as I."

"Oh, I give up! Hey, boy; *brandy-panee lao!* I suppose he can also shoot and kill pig in the same almighty style!"

"All right, Mac; if he's coming up to Bettiah you'll have a chance to test his mettle. Oh, by the way! When are your friends coming?"

"To-morrow, I hope; I'm going in to Segowlie to meet the train, anyhow."

"More chaps coming for a look at the Lalkura?" asked Bewloe.

"No, Major," answered McKenzie, sarcastically; "they're modest, and'll be satisfied with pig; though I hope to show 'em a tiger or two to keep up our reputation. I've counted you in for a gun, old man, if they scare anything up."

And then Harris yawned, and the little party separated and strolled off to their various quarters.

And while they slept, from north and south and east and west the pilgrims came, crowding the trains to suffocation; and His Highness of Bettiah pressed

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on with his guests, among whom were Loda and Yah Mahommed, besides a dozen Government *wallahs*, both men and women.

And by another route came Nicholas and Meredith. And Nicholas explained to his friend the peculiar situation in Nepaul as he saw it, much to his friend's edification and also to that of Abdulla, who sat among the baggage and listened to the discourse with a grave and interested expression on his countenance.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THREE mornings later, Meredith, Nicholas and McKenzie were out on the veranda of the latter's bungalow, discussing the prospects of pig, when Meredith noticed a little dusty cloud away toward the west from where he sat.

"What is it, Mac?" he asked, pointing it out to his host. "See the yellow flashes in it?"

McKenzie stood with shaded eyes, looking steadfastly, then exclaimed: "Y've good sight, Doc! 'Tis some o' th' Bettiah folk coming in—some one who fancies himself a whole lot, by the look of it. Reach me those glasses, Billy—there, just behind the door. Now let's see!" Then: "Well, man, I'll be damned—I surely will—if it ain't Cock-a-loop himself; coming to ask after the health of you doctor chaps."

"Who's Cock-a-loop? Not——"

"Yes, His Highness of Bettiah, Runjit Bohe, a most august personage—that is, in Bettiah—but in Motihari I'm none so certain. In fact, I'm afraid I've seen him indulging in the sinful delights of the flesh in a manner unbecoming his high estate. He has what you doctor chaps call a continual 'ether

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thirst.' It's very sad in one so young! Here, Allan, take a look; you can see the lances flashing now."

By and by, as the prospective guests drew near, the three men walked over to the club to meet them, and had barely gained the compound when a dusty cavalcade came careering up with a rattle and dash which was most impressive. They formed a solid crescent of well-horsed, fine-looking Indian Lancers, dipping their orange pennons in a rippling salute as they reined in with a slipping of hoofs and a jangle of harness. At the same time two gentlemen mounted on powerful hunters trotted from the centre of the crescent and in through the compound gates. They were both dressed in English riding costume, save for the hat—top-boots, whipcord breeches and belted coats: a well-set-up pair, young, brown and comely, with rakish turbans aslant on their heads, and they hailed McKenzie vigorously and somewhat profanely as they cantered up the drive.

Instantly a dozen *syces* were around them grinning and salaaming, and as they led the horses off the elder of the twain called loudly after them to see that Mahound's nostrils were washed out with vinegar and water before the horse ate. He then followed his younger brother up on the veranda, where several men were already pressing the hospitality of the place upon him.

"Well, Mac, what's the news, man? Anybody

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here?" inquired the elder man between sips from a long whisky glass.

"Oh, yes, Your Highness, a few; but there's always room for more, if y've got any friends to bring in."

"Tell you what; I have got some people up at Bettiah—or shall have to-morrow—and I thought we might get up something to amuse them. The *shikarries* told me you were looking up pig, so I determined to see if we couldn't pull off an impromptu match like we had last year. How about it; can you get some boys together?"

"Surely yes, that's all right; but why not get the elephants out and show 'em some tigers?"

"Well, we might hit that off later, but we've got some ladies along whom Birkhana here is anxious to please. (S-sh-sh," he whispered under his breath. "It's a little Egyptian lady, who's got the boy on the snaffle.) What d'y' think; can we make it go?"

"We certainly can! Suppose we make it Bettiah against Motihari. How many men can you bring?"

"Well, there's Birk and the Resident; and two chaps you've not met—Boundary Commission men, staying with us (they've got their ladies along); and then there's Mahommed and myself, and I flatter me you'll find us a hard crowd to beat, eh?"

"Who's the last man—Mahommed? The man from up in the hills there?"

"Yes; Yah Mahommed—big Government gun.

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You've surely met him. No? Well, he's an old gentleman, but he's no end of a good chap. You'll like him immensely; and, being a Mussulman, he's death on pig! . . . How's that? Ha-ha-ha!"

McKenzie grinned audibly and the joke went round the veranda. Then the Scotchman began sifting his men. "Well, there's Bewloe, and Donovan, and myself, and I've got to put Nick and Meredith in the thing, naturally, you see," he explained. "Nick's all right if he ain't off practice, but Allan's a dark horse. Don't know if he ever saw a pig—devil of a wing shot though! We got among the quail yesterday and the beggar killed dead with every barrel as fast as the *shikarrie* could shove a gun in his hands, but, of course, pig's pig."

"Oh, well, so much the better for us. We'll lick you easy and then wind up with a dance here afterward. Got plenty of women?"

"About six."

"All right. We'll bring five Memsahibs and the Egyptian. Give you a tip, though; she's an adopted daughter or niece or something of Mahommed, and the old chap's mighty punctilious; so keep your chaps to the Memsahibs as much as possible. The other will probably be far away the best of the bunch, but—well, I've seen the old gentleman looking at Master Birk once or twice with a very sour face, and I wouldn't have any unpleasantness either here or at my place, while they are my guests,

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for the world. But I tell you what, Mac; the lady is in a class all to herself—as is the old man, for that matter! They came up from Bombay with us, and if Birk hadn't made a fool of himself I'm not so sure but what I would have. Eh! What's that? Tiffin? Gad! I *thought* I was hungry!"

Later, in the cool of the afternoon, these two modern Hindu gentlemen rode away again—rode hard, with their grim-looking escort jangling about and behind them; and Nicholas, who had been intensely interested in the guests, stood out on the veranda watching the sparkle and flash as the setting sun touched on spear and shield, on bit and spur and all the countless trappings of the troop.

"Well, Nick," inquired McKenzie from the doorway, "how'd y' like His Highness, Cock-a-loop?"

"He's all to the good, old man—'A, Number One,' as we say at home—and his brother, too. Gad! What a handsome boy! Say, Mac, they wouldn't bite twice at those two if they got 'em at, say Newport, or—— No, I guess Newport would about finish 'em!"

"Well, which end of 'em do you prefer; the turban or the breeches?"

"What the devil—— Ah, I see. Well, their clothes suited them so well you forgot to think about 'em; besides, *we* wear *puggarees*, and *cummerbunds*, and pajamas, and the devil knows what, when we want to be comfortable; so why shouldn't

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they wear breeches and Norfolk jackets? But gad, those chaps would swing even a *bheestee's mussac* with the grand air! It's blood, Mr. McKenzie; blood, sir, whatever we mushrooms may think! Take a Baboo, for instance. He's decent enough in his place—educate him, and every white man he meets wants to kick him! He deserves it, too, generally, for he's a pompous, strutting monstrosity. Now, these chaps—— What are they; Oxford men? Gad, they looked it, down to the ground; the only thing that puzzled me was that escort business. Damned picturesque and all that, but—modern—no!"

"That's just where the blood runs thick, Billy. Cock-a-loop's all you say—a gentleman; but he's got the pride of a hundred grandsires under his English-cut coat, and he wouldn't swap his little court at Bettiah for Windsor; and, if it came to a push—of course, he'll never allow this—he'd back those big lancers of his against the pick of the British Army, loyal as he is and always has been; and by Jove, sir, that's why I always like to take off my hat to Cock-a-loop!"

The following morning, when Abdulla brought Meredith's *chota-hazri* to his bedside, he laid near the teapot a folded native newspaper, a *khabar-i-khagaz*, and Allan caught sight of the heading intended for him immediately:

"DEATH OF JUGGI BIM CHUNDRA"

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He read that the house of this wealthy and energetic Hindu merchant had been broken into, pillaged, and the worthy man himself murdered—strangled to death, apparently, as his throat was terribly bruised when the body was found. There were other signs of violence about his person and the apartment where the tragedy occurred, but no clue to the actual perpetrators of the vile deed. The evidence of the servants, who had been gagged and bound by silent, masked figures, whom they had been unable to identify, seemed to point to a carefully planned attack on the *bunnia*, though in many quarters it was considered equally certain that the murder was but an incident of the sudden rising of the Leather Workers against the Pariahs. These two parties had been engaged in a bloody fight round and about the house of Juggi Bim, who was a well-known leader of the Left Hand faction, which the Chucklas supported. The police had restored order with the greatest difficulty, but most of their prisoners were not only evidently ignorant of the murder, but also of the reason of the fight in which they were taken red-handed, they having acted under the orders of leaders, who, as usual, had escaped. The article further commented on the seemingly small hope of further light being thrown on the matter, as the police were absolutely at fault as to the instigators of the Right Hand faction, who, as

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far as could be gathered, seemed to have been the aggressors in the matter.

Meredith pondered over this matter as he sipped his tea and smoked a cigarette. He understood at once what had happened. When Ben Alif's charming friends had broken into the front of the house in answer to his cry, some of them undoubtedly had slipped upstairs for loot, and the man to whom he, Meredith, had given a chance, had not been allowed to profit by it. He spoke to Abdulla, as he handed him back the paper:

"Well, boy; my diagnosis came true, even though I did weaken on it at the last moment. What thinkest thou of the news?"

"Sahib, I should hate to follow where those two—Aguf and he—have gone," answered the *khansamah* with a shudder.

"There is no need, boy, if thou dost watch thy feet diligently; and remember, if thou art at any time in fear, come to me and I will surely protect thee."

That evening a group of native impersonators, jugglers, and snake charmers, spread their rugs and baskets, forming a little camp out in the club compound, and after dinner every one came out to see the show.

It was fast growing dark, but the troupe remedied that by planting a square of slim poles, each tipped with an iron lamp barred like a grate and holding

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various oil-soaked roots which flamed fiercely and with a fairly steady light, throwing huge, weird shadows among the trees, and just touching on the native audience, who were squatted in a compact mass on the outer edge of the light, shivering with delight and fear.

It was the usual impossible wonder-show which men have puzzled over for years and grown weary of discussing, though the performers were more numerous and possibly more adept—if such could be imagined—on account of the fact that the troupe was on its way to the Maharajah's court at Bettiah to perform for his guests; so, naturally, they were the pick of their kind, and they had stopped at the club on their way by orders from His Highness.

Seeds were planted, watered, and breathed upon, and straightway sprouted green, bore branch and leaf and fruit before your very eyes. Then, like Aaron's rod of old, a dancing cobra developed a voracious appetite and swallowed his companions one by one. Quite impossible—but you saw him do it.

Hold! There's a sudden quarrel in the little camp. See! Two men are fighting—a slim boyish Goorkha and a heavy-weight Bengali; there's a feint, a thrust, and then, with a terrific whistling sweep of the Goorkha's *kookerie*, the Bengali's head rolls to your very feet, the face all bloody and

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twitching; while the huge body staggers a moment, then goes down suddenly in a shapeless heap.

The ladies shriek, and you feel your own mouth grow dry, while a nausea rises in you as you see the warm blood soaking the thirsty turf; and this, though your reason repudiates the horror.

Another catches the head quickly, mutters *munthra thunthras*, breathes on it, and sticks it back on the Bengali's shoulders. More *munthras*, and lo! the man's hands go creeping up to his head, weakly and with a groping movement at first, till, feeling it, he gains confidence, pulls it this way and that—it is as fast as ever it was or will be.

So the weird show goes on with the *darboukhas* and viols crying softly, and strange creations, half man and half beast—shadowy impossible things—coming and going among the performers; with boys, nude brown children, climbing through void places in the air—or they are flung up by some brawny wrestler, and never come down again.

And you sit and listen and stare, and when the thing's done you call harshly for *brandy-panee*, and then scoff and argue and explain what better men have kept silent about.

Nicholas had seen these things many times. Ten years before he would have discussed them with avidity, wrestled with them, insisted on trap-doors and invisible wires belligerently in defense of his outraged senses, but to-day he held his peace.

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Such things doubtless were neither of God nor Devil, but ten years' experience had shown him the possibility of other and more scientific alternatives than trap-doors and false-bottomed flowerpots.

During the performance the impersonators also had been doing much good work.

Now it was their patron, the Maharajah himself, who advanced bowing to the Sahib-logue, and again, the old Hindu judge from over at the court-house, Hurree Odarabi Ja, would deliver an eloquent peroration, his gold glasses on the tip of his fat nose, and his arms extended with the pompous gestures he was so fond of using—a perfect picture of the man in form and feature, voice and pose, that called out a storm of applause in which the old gentleman himself joined heartily.

And this figure had but gone when another crept into the lighted square—a bloated, evil-looking Hindu with cruel little eyes. He looked around fearfully and his very lips seemed gray with some pressing terror. Then, as a tense hush fell on the audience, this thing cried out whimperingly:

"My Lord, I—I—— Who art thou? What have I done? Lo! I am a poor man and full of years."

Then the arms went up shakingly; there was a choking gasp; and the figure toppled over head first. And as it fell, a hoarse cry went up from the servants' quarters, and everybody began to question what the thing meant and what the cry.

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The players seemed themselves quite upset over this appearance, for the impersonator denied all knowledge of the personality he had assumed, insisting that it must have been a spirit which had controlled him. But Meredith watched the man closely, and Nicholas watched Meredith, who had started violently when the impersonation had begun.

Later, fortunes were served out. These were received and read with much laughter and chaff, but with here and there a puzzled silence.

It was the man who had impersonated the strange Hindu who approached Meredith with some slips of paper, begging him humbly to draw a fortune. He did so, scrutinising the fellow's face without result; then, opening the paper, he read in Urdu:

"*Ram, ram,* Rao-Sahib; the moon sails high."

There was a laugh as the others made out the gist of his paper, but Meredith dropped it somewhat clumsily and both he and the juggler stooped for it together. A whisper passed; then Meredith drew up sharply and looked the man in the face with evident suspicion.

But the fellow exclaimed aloud: "*Arre,* Sahib, thou dost not like thy *munthra;* see, I will even show thee a charm which will make it clear to thine understanding."

He fumbled in his *dhotee* and drew forth a little oval jade case, which he passed to Meredith, bidding

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him open it, and seeming in no wise disconcerted by the fact that several of the ladies and a couple of men had grouped around to see what was going on. Meredith opened it slowly, and sat stiff in his chair staring into the face of—Loda.

He seemed to wake up suddenly as a girl's voice exclaimed: "Why, what is it, Mr. Meredith? Oh, pshaw! What a silly joke! Just a bit of looking-glass; and I was sure something would jump out and frighten you!"

But Nicholas, who was watching closely, decided that something had jumped out and frightened his friend, though what it was he could not say.

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CHAPTER XXIV

ABDULLA slept that night on the floor of his master's room; the impersonation of Juggi Bim had proved too much for his nerves, and nothing but the close presence of the Sahib would restore his confidence. He got another fright later in the night; for, waking suddenly, he saw a white figure moving about the darkened room, and Meredith only just warned him in time to prevent his crying out and rousing the whole bungalow.

"Sh-s-sh, boy; 'tis I. I am going out for a little; do thou lie still till I return," and he passed out into the moonlight. There were several servants sleeping on the veranda, one of whom he touched, and the man thus waked rose up and followed him out of the compound.

The two had barely passed, when the *cheeks* of the window to Nicholas's room drew cautiously aside, and that gentleman's tousled head appeared in the opening, looking out blankly after them.

Two minutes later he, too, stepped across the veranda, and hurrying to the compound gate, he stood looking down the moonlit misty way which

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led through the distant bazaar. In a moment he saw two figures move across the space of moonlight and draw into the shadow of the line of little shops, and after a little indecision he started off in pursuit.

It was not a difficult matter to follow the pair without detection through the profusion of shadows, past the indigo vats and factory walls, and then along the edge of a great patch of feathery bamboos which whispered eerily in the cool night air, and so on and on till it seemed as if the leaders must be going clean out to Bettiah. But there came a sudden halt at last on the edge of a grove of sal trees, and Nicholas dropped in his tracks and lay flat on the yellow baked ground, for he had been full in the moonlight at the moment. As he lay in the yellow dust his khaki clothes were barely discernible twenty yards away, but he watched the two anxiously till they finally turned about and disappeared in the shades of the wood. Then, still unsure as to whether he had been discovered, he crawled cautiously out of the patch of light and made his way deviously and with much care to the place where they had disappeared.

He stood in the shade of the trees, listening and watching, but saw no sign of their presence; and after awhile, fearing to lose them, he moved ahead again. But as he pressed on the trees began to close in darkly, and the underbrush grew so dense that he might not walk silently. He paused

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shortly and turned about listening, but the way behind seemed also to have closed in, while there was no sign nor sound to show the way the men had gone. He made up his mind that he had lost them, and was slowly retracing his steps, when a quick rustling to the right brought him crouching down to the earth once more.

And as he waited motionless, not knowing whether it was a man or some prowling beast, but with his revolver ready for either, a voice whispered, "Is that thou, O Mauro Singh?"

And Nicholas whispered quickly, "Aye."

"*Arre*, haste thee, man! Hast lost thy road? I would guide thee, but—— There, to the right. See, they've lit the lamps. Hurry, Brother!"

The Doctor needed no second invitation to be gone. He plunged into the shadows farthest away from the whispering voice, but a few yards ahead he halted. There was a light shining through the trees a little off the course he was following, and, without more ado, he made for it as directly as he might.

Soon he descried the low, heavy roof-line of a Hindu temple, and, drawing close, found a half-ruined and entirely unpretentious pile, banked and massed about with a great tangle of vegetation. He saw that the light shone through one of the numerous crevices in the stone wall, there being no attempt at any outer court. Keeping well in the

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rear of the ruin, he crept slowly up, and then with infinite care forced a passage through the dense barrier of vines till he stood against the very wall, which Time and many storms had riven crumblingly through its whole massive breadth.

He drew the green tangle about him, closing the way by which he had come; then set to work to clear a better view through the great crack. It was half filled with rotting débris, but he worked patiently and in a few minutes was rewarded by a clear view of the interior.

At first the light dazzled him, though 'twas but from two oil lamps hanging high on the doorposts of the shrine itself, but his eyes soon grew clear of the darkness and he gazed his fill.

The doors of the shrine were gone, and the image which had once filled it was crumbled to dust long ago; but the moss-grown doorposts still remained, and the lamps flickering from them cast a feeble gleam into the various niches where the lesser gods had once stood and touched on the great, girthy pillars of the inner court. Round about sat some dozen motionless figures, with gaze fixed and tense upon the entrance to the gloomy shrine, across whose darkness a white incense-cloud was drifting raggedly.

Nicholas looked on these men with amazement; rubbed his eyes and looked again before he would accept what he saw, for here was the strangest assemblage surely that ever sat in harmony. Near

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to him was a priest of the Lord Bhudda; there a Brahmin, next to a lama from Tibet; yonder was an Irani moolah whispering to an old white-bearded Jain; while several lesser lights—fakirs and *chelas*, doubtless, of these great ones—sat still farther back.

As the Doctor stood pondering this strange gathering the mouth of the shrine suddenly belched out smoke, thick and pungent, with now and anon slow flares of green flame; and as the smoke rolled forth the watching men rose to their feet and, somewhere in the shadows, a *vina* and a *darboukha* played softly.

As the smoke cleared away from the broken doorway the lamplight fell full on two men standing there. One, a little in advance, an old white-bearded priest in saffron-coloured robes, whose fine strong face shone with exalted emotion, and behind him the other, a slender figure, erect and graceful, a Hindu, robed royally and gemmed.

Nicholas stared at this second figure stupidly, helplessly; for it was the man he had been following—his friend, Allan Meredith.

While he still stared in hopeless bewilderment the yellow-robed one advanced and with outstretched arms blessed the waiting ones and bade them draw near.

"This, O Brothers, is truly he who was to come. Behold the very man!"

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Slowly the princely one came forward and knelt on the stone slabs at the entrance, letting loose the jewelled breast-coat which he wore, and Nicholas saw the priests advance one by one and stoop and gaze, then thrust each a hand into the kneeling man's breast. When they were satisfied, the yellow-robed one stood before the Prince and questioned thus:

"Who art thou, Stranger, and what thy business here?"

And Nicholas's head swam as he heard the low, dignified answer, "I am Rama Lalkura, of Bhaitypore, and I am come to seek my own."

"Rama Lalkura," continued the old man, "we, the Children of the Brotherhood, have looked toward thy coming, and we bid thee welcome. Dost thou know, O Brother, the way thou hast to walk?"

"I know it in part; but much have I forgot since the senses shut me in."

"And thou hast no fear—no doubt of the wisdom of thy coming?"

"I have faith, my Brothers, in the judgments I made ere I came back to the flesh, even though to-day those judgments seem disturbed because others are pressing on me and because of the habits of this body which I have borrowed."

"And Fear?"

"For myself, I have no fear; but for those I

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love, and those who have been misled, I could weep tears of blood."

"Brother, they would not avail. The Law which leadeth thee leadeth them also into a more perfect understanding, though the way be a bitter way. And She whom thou lovest—for Her, shall not love suffice?"

"Aye, surely, surely, it will suffice; and yet thou knowest, thou who hast sustained me in the past, how often the lamp has gone out."

"Rama Lalkura, thou didst take thy choice long years ago betwixt Love and—Wisdom. Love hath evaded thee because thou wast not wise; but in the pursuit of it, and through the bitterness of its loss, thou hast found the Wisdom thou didst reject; and now thy Love also shall not fail thee. Rama Lalkura, Prince of Bhaitypore, rise; stand upon thy feet; take that which is thine without fear, and go hence. We, thy Brethren, will see thee no more till our work is also done; and may the part thou hast chosen bring thee into still places, where thou and She may fill up the measure of thy unity."

And one by one the strange priests laid their hands on the head of the kneeling man, blessing him, and then lifted him to his feet; and the *chelas* took down the lamps; and the music, that had been as a slow, soft undertone, shrilled high as the group of men advanced to the gaping door of the shrine. And as they crossed the threshold, once more the

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smoky cloud belched forth, with the green flames struggling in the midst.

The smoke crept out through the crevice, and Nicholas drew away chokingly from its pungent fumes; and, without waiting for further thought, broke roughly through the sheltering vines and made boldly for the front of the shrine.

The smoke was still hanging thick about the place when he groped his way between the great pillars of the court, so thick and pungent that he had recourse to his handkerchief to save his lungs, and finally was driven back to the outer air.

Here he was seized with a new fright. If he could not breathe in the open court, how could those others and Allan breathe in the tomb-like shrine? What did it mean? Was he mad, or were they? And then he raised his voice aloud: "Allan! Ho, Allan Meredith, I say!"

And out of the gloomy shrine there sprang a hundred mocking echoes: "I say—I say—I say!"

Thrice he rushed to the very doorway of the shrine, and thrice beat as hasty a retreat. He set to calling again, in English and in a dozen native dialects; but there only came those futile echoes from the place of the crumbled and forgotten gods.

And at last, when the smoke abated, he got in and wandered round and round, wasting his matches

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frantically, and then feeling his way, and ever calling to his friend.

The dawn came, and it found him still at his furious search, striving to lift impossible slabs which might hide the secret of where Meredith had been spirited to, thrusting his stick here and there into every cranny, with the same vain hope, till of a sudden a voice startled on his ear:

"What seekest thou, Sahib?"

He fronted round with a bound and sprang to the entrance of the court. A slim young Hindu stood gazing at him curiously, and he noted quickly the Brahmin's student cord, the curious staff, and the whole garb of the recluse.

"I seek a friend—a sick man—who wandered here last night. I saw him in this place with a dozen strange priests, saw him one moment, and then a great smoke hid him; and when I got in, the shrine was empty. Dost thou know—hast thou seen anything? Tell me, I pray thee!"

"Thou hast troubled thyself without cause, Sahib. But we know thee, and the purity of thy motive, and I am sent to relieve thee of thy fear. Thy friend is sleeping in his room, and has been this two hours gone—as thou mayest satisfy thyself later, for his servant has kept watch while he was away."

"Now, what sayest thou, oh man; 'twas barely two hours since I saw him, and the way we came is fully that!"

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"Nay, Sahib, I may not argue with thee on this matter; but I understood that thou wert a student in some wise, and if so thou shouldst at least have recognised that those whom thou didst see here lately were not common men. Didst expect to see them walk out hence hand in hand to be the gossip of every village they passed? Nay; if thou must know, they passed out with the smoke; and courtesy alone, if nothing more, demanded that they take thy friend along. Nicholas Sahib, in some things thou art almost wise; yet thou stumblest over a little thing like time and space. See, thou hast left thy stick."

Nicholas turned for the stick and then in a sudden creeping fear looked back again, and paused, and caught his breath sharply. The Hindu was standing there still, and met his frightened gaze half smilingly, but the Doctor grew white and stiff with terror, despite the smile, for he could see through the man's body—see the green, sun-tipped leaves moving gently; they were vague and faint at first, but grew more vivid and bold as the man faded silently. Now, there was but a shimmering, silvery outline that swayed in the little windy eddies that moved the leaves, and now that was gone—and there was nothing but the play of brilliant colour and the dancing of the leaves.

Doctor William Nicholas, F. R. S., didn't wait for his stick, but made a record-breaking run, for his weight, till he got out of that wood and into an

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open sunny space. Here he halted for breath, and later, while still gazing at the dark woods he had left, he remarked softly and with much fervour, "Well, I'll be damned!"

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CHAPTER XXV

For several days previous to His Highness Runjit Bohe's proposed sporting event, the pigs in the neighbourhood of Motihari had a decidedly bad time of it, and the rounding-up didn't soothe their naturally inflammable tempers. Marhut Bhund, the captain of the Maharajah's lancers, rode in to the Station the night before the tournament with a troop of picked horse as a bodyguard for the ladies should they decide to honour the sport with their presence. Despite this compliment, several of the younger woman boldly lamented that they were prohibited from taking an active hand in the game itself.

There was a general exodus in the early morning, after a hasty breakfast of tea and toast, and it was quite a cavalcade that went rolling and trotting out on the Tirhoot road, led by Marhut Bhund's gallant troop. There were *tongas* and dog-carts and phaetons, big Australian walers and frisky little polo ponies, besides the *bheestee's* big rawboned mule who acted as a rear guard. There was colour, too, of brilliant umbrellas, of the lancers' uniforms and pennons, and the ladies' gay dresses.

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A couple of hours brought them in sight of the tents of the Bettiah people, and shortly Meredith found himself bowing gravely to his old friend, Loda, in answer to Prince Birkhana's introduction.

She was a fresh revelation to him, and certainly to Nicholas, in her dainty khaki riding-habit, mounted on a superb Baluchi mare the like of which neither man had ever seen before. She sat like a slim young statue, cool, radiant, dominant, as far differenced from the rest of the women as was possible to imagine; and this difference was emphasised by the half-barbaric touch lent by the jaunty turban she wore.

Birkhana was paying her the most open and assiduous court, which she received in much the same way she had the attentions of the bazaar men in Bombay. Had she desired to inflame the boy, she could have taken no better way; for, while he was clearly piqued, his knowledge of his position and fortune, together with his physical attractions, prevented his being easily discouraged.

Meantime, Mahommed watched the young man's wooing very calmly, never showing by so much as the lifting of an eyebrow that it annoyed him; but then, he was a peculiar old gentleman, who never let his heart run away with his head; and Birkhana was a very popular young Prince, wealthy also, in his own right, and if it ever should occur to him that he was ambitious—well, Mahommed might

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find him useful after the little game had been won, over in Nepaul.

Meredith had looked once deep into Loda's eyes as he bowed in his saddle, but no word passed between them; and, on turning the next moment, he found himself face to face with Yah Mahommed. They were introduced conventionally, and both leaned forward to shake hands, but just as their fingers touched, Meredith's waler shied—Loda's Baluchi mare had brushed his flanks—and the two men were separated instantly.

Mahommed was dressed, as were his hosts, in khaki riding clothes and the turban which even the European Sahib has adopted largely, for *shikarrie* purposes at least, in preference to the usual cumbersome pith helmet. He sat his big hunter with an easy grace, a fine figure of a man; and many a swift, admiring glance flashed from eyes that were bright that morning at the stalwart, white-bearded old Moslem.

McKenzie eyed him a little jealously, but even he was speedily won over by the geniality of the man, and later these two rode off together to settle the boundary lines.

Meantime the cooks were busy with a combination of breakfast and tiffin, and by eleven o'clock a hungry and jovial party sat down to do justice to their efforts. They manage these matters well in India. You order tiffin in a grove of shade

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trees for, say 12:30 P. M., and pig under some more trees, a couple of miles away, for 3 P. M. That gives the salad time to settle, and the chance for a smoke, before you go up against the Evil One in the shape of a big runting black boar with tusks which he drives joyously and with skill into the stomach of your pet polo pony (if you're so foolish as to use him), and then turns again and endeavours to rend you also.

Having satisfied their sharp appetites, the now merry party took horse again and pushed on to the place where the sport was to be run off.

The spectators were grouped with the carriages on the shady edge of a pleasant grove and massed about by Bohe's spearmen. Meredith sat on his waler quite close to the little Baluchi mare, and Loda and he chatted casually among the gay throng while the first three heats were on. They watched Mahommed, young Birkhana, and lastly the Bettiah Resident, outmaneuver McKenzie and his Segowlie friends and carry off the honours of the first round brilliantly, to the extreme discomfort of some five unhappy pigs. And then Meredith was called to take his hand in the contest. He had worn the International sweater on the rush line for England, and could use the gloves quite handily, but in the matter of pig he was as guileless as an infant.

Loda, who knew it was his first experience at the game, wished him good luck, and eyed him a little

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curiously, he thought, as he rode down the field with his competitors. He wondered if she thought he was afraid of a pig, and then he laughed, and——

"*Pig! Pig! Kabardar!*" The game was on! Fortune favoured him at the start. The brute doubled at the rush and then made straight for the boundary, a long run, and the big waler was soon lengths ahead of the bunch, with pig running gamely forty yards beyond. 'Twould be an easy kill, with all the other chaps out of it—almost too easy! This was hardly sport, when the beggar wouldn't show fight.

Suddenly a dozen Indian spearmen trotted into fours deep not fifty yards ahead of the game, and the sun glinted on the trappings of the rest of the troop as they closed in square around the carriages. This unexpected evolution plainly disconcerted the grunting one, for he nearly turned a summersault in his anxiety to stop and view it. When he had done so, the sight evidently did not please him, and, with a snort, he turned round—and spotted Meredith. Ah! That was his game. So!

There was a dusty, riotous rush, the glint of a spearhead along a bristling spine, and then an awful shriek of agony as the huge tusks tore upward through the quivering horseflesh, and the dusty rush swept on.

The waler reared high under the terrible punishment, then fell heavily, carrying his rider down

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with a crash. For one long moment the world spun round. Then the shouts and the pain called him back. He half raised himself. From all sides, men—black and white—were riding at him, spurring hard with spears set and pointed low. What did it mean? Then the sense of the yells—"*Kabardar! Cover up! Cover up!*"—came home to him and he struggled fiercely, but his leg was flattened under the horse and he was helpless. He looked again, and shuddered as he saw that dirty rushing pig not twenty yards from him and coming back with lowered head to finish the game. The nearest Indian spear was fully thirty yards away, but as his senses swam they both seemed on top of him.

An instant later, when he could see the cruel little eyes, and the dust had almost reached him, there came a cry.

"*Pig! Pig! Kabardar!*" rang out the challenging warning that claimed the stroke! Across the front of the flying lancers sprang the little Baluchi mare, hardly seeming to spurn the ground as the girl bent over its neck with spear well held and steady. At the cry, the other riders, who saw they could never come in time, swerved off the line, according to rule, and gave the girl the right of way.

It was a close thing—an awfully close thing—as few of them are likely to forget! The choking smell of the hateful beast was in his throat ere the girl reached it; then she drove home swift and

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true, right through the bristling neck, pinning him to the ground so that he turned one convulsive summersault and lay in a quiet heap alongside his victims.

The girl didn't faint nor do anything conventional, but just looked into the man's eyes a moment as the rest came riding back to aid; her face was white, and when he saw her thus over him he whispered hoarsely, "Soondai!" She sprang to the ground, and was on her knees supporting him before the rush of the rescue was on them, and her quivering lips were busy at his ear: "My lord, my dear lord——!"

They got the horse off him, and Nicholas examined his bones but found them whole, though he was badly bruised and glad enough of a seat in one of the carriages for the rest of the day.

Well, Bettiah beat Motihari most shamefully, the latter only scoring three clean kills to eleven, but Birkhana was not jubilant; there are other things in the world besides pig, and he felt, after Loda's gallant rescue, that in some curious manner she was lifted beyond him; his compliments and attentions suddenly seemed, even to himself, futile and meaningless. Loda was more gracious to him, more considerate; but once, he saw her eyes wet under the shadow of her turban, and there was a soft radiance over her face that he did not understand and which awed him somewhat. He knew miserably these signs were not for him, but, like a

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brave boy, hid his troubles. He had been so sure in the morning—not that she loved him, but that the way to it was clear—and now in the afternoon a little cloud had risen, surely no larger than a man's hand; and whence or why it came he knew not, but his hope was suddenly dead. And the girl was finding time from some deep emotion to show him gentleness and give him aid in the decent burial of his dead.

He left her later and went over to the carriage where Meredith was, and sat and smoked and talked with him, and when they parted these two were friends—perhaps for Loda's sake, though no one word of her had passed between them. Birkhana had pressed the hospitality of Bettiah upon him, telling him how gay and worth while a visit it was, with all the pilgrims passing through on their way to Holy Pashupati. And Meredith, warming to the young fellow, whose eyes were full of pain despite his brave front, promised to ride out two days later.

And then Motihari and Bettiah parted once more. Mahommed brought Loda to the carriage and stood by while Meredith strove to thank her again, but she stopped him quickly: "Not now, else you will think you have paid all my dues and will forget to come and see me when you are well. *Au revoir*, Doctor Meredith."

As Mahommed rode home by the girl's side he showed his complete satisfaction over the happenings

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of the day. "By the head of the Prophet, child! I grow prouder of thy wisdom and skill every day! That ride, and the way thou didst handle the pig! 'Twas only matched by thy skill in handling this young Hindu Birkhana, and Meredith. Truly, I could not see how to hold them both; yet thou hast not only done it, but joined them together in friendship; how didst thou manage it, child?"

"I did but tell him strongly in my thoughts that his desires were vain, and he is sensitive, receptive, and—understood."

"And thy doctor-man, what didst think to him; or perhaps thou didst speak to this one, eh?" he asked railingly.

"My lord, I have followed thy guidance in my every thought and word to this man."

"And he?"

"Has responded, even as thou didst foresee he would."

"Is he prepared, dost thou think, to make the change boldly now?"

"Mostly surely he is. He will come to Bettiah, and I shall have gone on to Girza-il-Kab with thee, leaving word for him to follow if he cares to see me. Then thou and he can settle thy plans together."

"Ah, yes; 'tis good, child. And art thou prepared to carry out thy part to the end—to follow this man to his house?"

"Follow him? As what, my lord? Nay, I did

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not understand; I thought thou wouldst take his body and fight his fight."

"Not so. My men will not fight under any other leader save me, and this man cannot win without the aid of my people. So he must even go and fight his fight, and thou must go with him to hold him to our will, while I aid him and fight this last fight as Yah Mahommed. Nay, child, listen and be not so cast down. There is no shame in this matter. Thou wilt go as the priestess of his house, the heaven-born guide and champion of this wondrous *avatar*—not as wife or concubine."

"But, my lord, hast thou considered that this man has come to be other than he was when he lay sick at my house?"

"Thou meanest——?"

"He is a lover, to-day."

"*Tlc! Tlc!* So much the better. He will but the more readily bend to thy will."

"But—but—suppose my will grow weak and his should overpower me?"

"Nay, I will not suppose thy foolish fancies; thou art upset by the emotions of the day."

"But, my lord, truly I——"

"But truly, child," broke in Mahommed testily, "thou must let it drop! Thou didst have these fears from the very first, yet one by one the dangers have been passed, and I tell thee now as I told thee

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then, there is but one thing in the whole universe that can foil this matter."

"And that?" she questioned, fearfully.

"The will of Yah Mahommed; there is nothing else!"

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So it came to pass that Meredith, at the week's end, rode into Bettiah and found that Loda had gone with Mahommed and Birkhana up to Girza-il-Kab, leaving a *dak* set for him to follow and Israel Ben Alif to guide him on the way. And three days later a runner brought letters for McKenzie and Nicholas from Allan begging them both to excuse his sudden flight, as business of vital importance had called him away from Bettiah.

Nicholas immediately posted off to the city and saw the Maharajah, who told him quite openly that both Meredith and Birkhana were up in the mountains with Yah Mahommed and that he considered them "beastly lucky"; that he would be up there himself if it had not been for very strong hints from the Resident that it would be objectionable to the people at Calcutta. He did not know, nor care, which side Mahommed was going to take in the affair, or even if he was going to take any at all; and he considered that if Nicholas was anxious about his friend, the best thing to do would be to follow him up there, though he acknowledged it would probably be a hard journey without guides—with

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the possibility of finding the people gone when he got there.

Nicholas rode back to the Station in a very bad temper. He blamed himself for not having spoken to Meredith after that night at the ruined temple and obtained some kind of an explanation, which might have guided him now, but when he had found Meredith comfortably asleep in bed on his return that early morning he had balked at the talk, seeing how unpleasant it might easily become if Allan took offense at his espionage.

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CHAPTER XXVI

On the night of February the twelfth a group of officers stood on the wide steps of Narayan Hitti, the King's palace in Khatmandu. They were dressed in brilliant uniforms and carried themselves in a capable, soldierly manner. In the centre of the group was the Prime Minister, Shaum Shir Singh, and next him his brother, Dawhar Singh, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Nepaul. They were discussing the political outlook with the high priest, the Raj Guru, who had just crossed from the palace to join them. A number of lesser lights stood around; some, mere boys in the uniform of generals; others, war-scarred veterans. In the roadway below lounged the slaves of the priest, who had escorted him across, and these had joined eagerly with the servants of the officers, who were also waiting there with their masters' horses. Uniformed sentries paced at regular distances along the roadway, and at the foot of the steps a little squad of men was drawn up on guard. To the right could be seen the lights of the British Residency, and in front, across the parade ground, those of the city.

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There was a lull in the rapid talk, and Dawhar Singh, turning to the door, was about to enter the palace, when a startled exclamation stopped him. Facing sharply about, he saw the whole night lit up, seemingly, by a distant flame. It was like the Northern Lights save for a warmer hue, and lasted perhaps two minutes, during which the men on the steps stood like statues, motionless and awestruck.

The darkness fell again, and with it came an incredulous murmur from the soldiers, who turned this way and that seeking confirmation or refutation of their fears, and ere they could gain either a rocket shot up somewhere in the far south, and then two others, in rapid succession.

"From Bhatgaon, Your Excellency," spoke up one of the elder officers.

Before his words had died away there came a sudden flare of brilliant light from the east, so sharp and vivid that the temples of Pashupati, and even the glint of the moving river, were clearly seen; and as the darkness fell once more a bugle-call went singing shrilly in the city just behind them.

At this the priest hastened in with the news to the King, and Dawhar Singh sprang down the steps to his horse, calling orders to his staff as he went.

There was a great clattering of horse in the rough roadways, and trumpets began to blare. Khatmandu, which had retired for the night, woke again to active life; and Patan; and farther, Bhatgaon!

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There was a wild jangling of bells from city to city, and away on the distant hills spots of flame burst out, with now and again a great red flare.

Three batteries of artillery came across the parade at a quick trot. An officer ran down the steps, flung himself across his horse and galloped away into the darkness. The guns went clattering and bumping after him, and finally, from out the distant south, there came the spit and snarl of rifles.

And a whisper ran through the frightened night, "*He is come!*"

A little earlier on the same day, as the sun was touching the snow-tipped hills to crimson, green and amber, and shooting long arrows of light adown the shading valley, there came to the outer court of a little hill temple that was set well back in a piece of heavy jungle, two pilgrims—master and servant, if one might judge from their dress and bearing. The leader of these, halting a moment, motioned his follower to wait, and crossed the inner court to the door of the shrine itself ere his way was stayed by a white-robed priest, in answer to whose question, "What wouldst thou, Brother?" he said quietly, "I am Rama Lalkura of Bhaitypore, and I would rest and eat a little rice, and my servant also; for we have come a far way."

"Thou art welcome, O Rama Lalkura, and thy servant. There is a *charpoy* waiting for thee, and

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the flesh of a young kid, curried with *dhall*, is steaming just beyond. Rest, my lord, and eat thy fill."

Having set the meat and drink before his guest, nor questioned him with one curious word, the man excused himself and went to look to the comfort of the servant in the outer court, who was none other than our friend Abdulla Millik. This done, he passed out into the gathering shadows and set a light to a piled-up heap of grasses and leaves.

As the flames caught, he dropped some powders to their heart, and they leaped high in response, changing to green and then scarlet, and then died down quickly. He paused, looking out across the valley where the shadows lay thick on the farther hills. An answering flame leaped up, which changed like his in colour, and then died down.

An hour later the hills were all ablaze with signal-fires; and the little grove that hid the temple and the ways to and beyond it were full of armed men, coming and going into the night, and as those hurrying north passed those drawing south they whispered, "*He is come!*"

Some hours after night had fallen, the outposts of the Hillsmen came in touch with those of King Vikrama Sah on the hillside above Bhatgaon. The latter challenged them, "Stand; who are ye?" And out of the darkness a fierce voice replied, "Tell Irkhana's grandson's whelp the Lord Lalkura bids him get to heel!" There was a short, sharp

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tussle, a few ill-directed volleys from *jazails* and Martinis that broke the blackness with jagged flames, and then the Hillsmen melted before the strong reinforcements which came to the aid of the King's troops.

From then on, all the night long, the valley was alive from end to end with regiments and battalions marching, with troops of light horse flying from point to point, and the rattle and bang of mountain batteries forcing their way through the foothills.

An hour before midnight a procession of rose-crowned chanting priests, with pipes and viols, set out from the little Hill temple, escorting Prince Rama Lalkura, or as the people knew him better, the Dada Babu—Elder Brother—to his house at Bhaitypore. And massed in solid phalanx round his horse rode the younger brothers, the Hill Rajahs, each wearing a white rose in his turban, the emblem of the old Raj-bhat Prince come back to lead them once again. After the musicians and priests came a snow-white cow with jewelled horns, a blooded heifer from the sacred flock, a sleek mild-eyed creature loaded high with fragrant roses and attended by seven *nautches*, slim alluring things of flesh and blood, who came on dancing to the rhythmic measure of the viols, and ever and anon forming graceful tableaux and scattering roses before the Dada Babu.

A dozen torches and a dozen priests led the way when first they started, but these swelled to a great

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triumphal host as the news of the coming spread. The mountainside was all ablaze with leaping fire and the flash of naked steel, while the volume of chanting grew apace till its burden burst all bounds of priesthood and a thousand lusty tribesmen sent the echoes tumbling through the hills:

Hail, Hail, the Dada Babu,
Welcome as the rosy morn!
See the swords flash forth to meet him;
See the fire leap up to greet him;
Hail, Lalkura!—Heaven Born!

And all the way to Bhaitypore the singing and the tumult grew. Wild, nude fakirs, daubed with saffron and vermillion, had sprung out of the night with frenzied followings of highlanders from far-off villages. Bands of shepherds, catching the echoes, had left their flocks, dug up their hidden arms, and rushed to join the Elder Brother.

So the tom-toms rattled, and the drums and castanets; the pipes and viols shrilled a wild treble, and all along the way *jakails* snarled a surly bass to the singing host that brought Prince Rama Lalkura home to Bhaitypore.

. . . . . .

At length the music and the shouting died away; he had kissed the last of his brethren's swords, and now Rama Lalkura, the Dada Babu, the mighty *avatar*, stood in his chamber, alone with his gods.

As he paced back and forth over the rug-strewn floor a sudden weariness of spirit seized him. He

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knew every beam and buttress of this great rock-fort; he had loved it in the past as perhaps only a Raj-bhat can, and long had dreamed of this home-coming—to his house, to his brethren, and to his people—but now he was here some chill ghost rose up and gibed at him.

Was it the years which had passed and gone? And had he moved with them despite himself? He could not say, but the great stone walls seemed to shut him in now, whereas, before, they had but shut others out. He needed rest, for on the morrow—nay, to-day—by the time 'twould be light enough to count the roof-tiles, his counsellors and men of war would be with him once more. He had flung himself down on the great couch when the last of his captains had gone, but the din of the home-coming rang in his ears, and he had soon risen again, restless and distraught, and set to pacing to and fro.

A sense of loneliness crept over him chillingly, and a great distaste. What was he?—neither spirit nor flesh—neither god nor man. Such, at least, was the people's attitude toward him. They gave him praise and much acclaim, would follow him fanatically, in through the very gates of hell if needs be, but there was evidently to be no warm touch of human sympathy. His brethren had set him high on a pedestal. It was of jasper and onyx, garlanded with flowers and gemmed

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about with precious stones; nevertheless, it was very lonely.

All the lights were out save one tiny ray, and the late moon was flooding the apartment through the deep embrasured window. He paused here after awhile, looking out on the old rose garden in melancholy reverie. And as if reproachful of his mood, a bulbul out there, beguiled by the brilliant moonlight, broke into song.

The low throbbing notes, pulsing liquidly across the garden, seemed laden with the sympathy he was craving. And when the song ceased, he drew his robe about him with a great scarf, passed into the antechamber where his servants lay, and so out into the garden—the old, old, rose garden, which loving hands had tended for well-nigh two hundred years against his coming.

'Twas truly a garden of delight, seen thus in the misty splendour of the yellow moon, with terraces of roses banked high about the house, and winding paths that lost themselves in the distant grayness. From the middle distance fell gently the tinkle of the old snow-fed fountain that had given life to the roses through all the heat and drought of a thousand years.

And round that centre spot they grew in heavy clinging clusters, massing it about lovingly, dropping their petals, crimson, cream, pale pink and white, into the overflowing marble basin where

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the golden oriole and the bulbul came to bathe at break of day.

And down these dim paths Lalkura paced. Tender vagrant scents pursued him wantonly, and fled again ere he could grasp them. So, wandering vaguely forlorn, with now and then a halt to put aside some trailing tendril which fain would have detained him, he came upon the fountain, and there he halted in a sudden agitation of amaze. For, pacing slowly down the path beyond, a woman came—or was it but a phantasy of moonlight? He stood and watched her, half in doubt and half in fear, and then it seemed as if all time swept back, and all regrets for other lives he since had lived. Once again he was the Raj-bhat Prince, and this—this was his heart's desire!

"Soondai, beloved! Ah, linger yet again midst the roses."

He advanced slowly, whispering and with arms outstretched in passionate longing, fearing she would fly—hoping she would stay.

She eyed his coming, softly, and waited with the lang'rous roses caressing her, till he knelt and touched his lips to the hem of her robe. And the scent of the roses and jasmine mixed in with the shimmering whiteness.

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"But, Soondai, why hast thou come?" Lalkura asked later.

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"Because I thought thou wouldst welcome me, my lord, not question my coming."

"Nay, my pearl, thou knowest how welcome thou art; but I would not have had thee come till—till I had made a safe place for thee. See, this very day I must even leave thee and go forth to meet Vikrama Sah."

"Ah-h-h! And if thou shouldst be slain?"

"Yes, yes, if I were slain—thou seest now this is no place for thee just yet."

"So this is thy understanding of love, my lord: perhaps to fall in battle—to go hence and leave me tied in the body—to set further years of hopeless wanderings betwixt thee and me? Methinks the night thou didst tell me the story of this quarrel of thine, disguising thyself as Goonarthi and thy enemies by foolish names I have forgot, but which did not deceive me—methinks, I say, thy love took on a nobler mien than this, to be afraid of death for either thee or me. But, perchance," she added, stinging him with slow scorn, "thou wast not thyself that night, but had for the moment overstepped thy limitations, as I have heard poets sometimes do in the singing of their song. Poor Goonarthi! Poor White Rose!"

"Thou art cruel, Soondai; thou dost make me think of Loda who tormented me."

"Nay, 'tis thou who'rt cruel, with thy sudden caution. What is death to thee or me, so long as

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we go together? Are there no gardens beyond where the roses blow as fair as these? No room in all the stars, that we should cling so tight to this? Nay, I like not Lalkura as I liked Goonarthi. Thy way is not mine, my lord, and I am somewhat wilful as thou mayest recollect."

"But what wouldst thou, sweetheart?" he cried miserably.

"What I would I certainly will, my lord," she answered, unrelenting. "Thou, as Lalkura of Bhaitypore, hast a grievous quarrel with this son of Irkhana. I also, methinks, have an interest in this issue; and if the White Rose of Bhaitypore may not ride with her lord this day, she will even ride with the Moslem, Yah Mahommed."

"No, no! Not that, dear heart! Forgive me; I did not understand! The priests will be here anon, and thou shalt ride as the White Rose—the bride of Lalkura to-day. But mark well, beloved, if evil chance befalls thee, I shall follow thee out—that I swear!"

"Even so, my lord," she answered, gently, now the victory was won. "If needs be we will go together; but thine arm is strong and thy cause just, and for the rest, surely love will suffice."

He started a little at these last words, and, when she questioned, said: "The wisest man I ever knew told me so in thy very words—that love would suffice—but his telling sounded like a knell to

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all the rest. What sayest thou, my heart; hast no prophecy to cheer us with to-day?"

"Nay, my lord; nothing but my love, for when I found my heart's desire I lost all else. In the past I used my magic wantonly on thee and others; now, my wisdom is turned to foolishness—yet, my foolishness is more satisfying to me than ever my wisdom was."

"And what of my lord Birkhana, Soondai?"

"Ah, nothing; less than nothing. I awoke that day when thy horse went down! I knew thee in a flash and myself as well, and I think somehow my friend Birkhana understood. Be it so. He's very young and will find a better ideal by and by."

"And Mahommed?" asked her lover's voice softly.

"My lord," she answered, with a sharp catch in her voice. "I am not ready to speak of him, for my heart is very bitter. He is an old, old man, and in the past has shown thy Soondai much kindness, although—— Nay, I cannot speak. But, my lord, let be if may be—for my sake—but if not, then the gods judge betwixt him and me."

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CHAPTER XXVII

On the night of the homecoming of Lalkura, Mahommed sat in a curious chamber high up in the tower of Girza-il-Kab. At first glance one would have taken it for a chemist's laboratory, and in some wise it undoubtedly was, though much of the apparatus would have been quite unintelligible to the modern man of science. There was the usual heterogeneous jumble of strangely shaped glass instruments, retorts, flumes, pumps, crucibles, funnels and measures, while in one corner, in a masonry enclosure, the ashes of a furnace still glowed from the late breath of a bellows which was hung by brass chains above it. But besides these usual and legitimate appliances, there were others, strange of form and of doubtful use. A great terrestrial globe, half covered with a luminous hood which was set with starry patterns and rimmed with signs of the zodiac, stood directly under the dome. On observing closely, one noticed that these patterns kept up a continual vibratory motion, which slowly changed their form. Then there was the figure of a man, somewhat after the fashion of an anatomical model. It seemed to be made of wax,

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and was set on a low pedestal so that an ordinary man might easily reach either the head or feet. There were markings of all the important organs, heart, lungs, liver and so on, together with their various functions, and the interrelating nerve systems clearly defined; and, curiously enough, on the brown wax chest there was a raised circle almost identical in appearance with the birthmark on the breast of Doctor Allan Meredith, but across the forehead a number of glittering pinheads stuck in the wax spelled out the word "*LALKURA.*" In various of the skull sinuses pins were also sticking, each marking delicate phrenological centers. In fact, this was one of those mysterious Oriental dolls through whose instrumentality the necromancers of all the world have declared their ability to influence their less gifted brothers; whether they ever justified their claims is aside from the story, but undoutbedly that figure, standing back from the circle of light, bore a close resemblance to Allan Meredith; and by and by, when Mahommed turned suddenly from the map he was studying and spoke directly to this figure, it enhanced the uncanniness of the thing immensely.

His words seemed to be rather more than the mere outward expression of his thoughts; they were forceful and didactic, and one finger rested on the map as though pointing out the spot and the situation to which his words referred.

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"Thou shalt attack by way of Chintapari, where they expect thee, so as to leave the flank open to me."

Set into the pedestal which held the figure was a round glass-covered dial with a slender hand which moved nervously like that of an unfixed compass, and a few seconds after this order was given the hand darted quickly to the right, and halted there with a tiny click. Mahommed reached across, touched a button which freed the hand again, and then turned back to his work.

He was studying a chart of the Nepaul valley, on which was marked the positions and numbers of the Government troops, and from time to time he stated these in the same positive manner to the wax figure, the hand responding more or less punctually.

All day long he had been busy with his fighting men, moving them by secret ways to positions of vantage. A strong battery was even then creeping by a precipitous path to the heights above Bhatgaon, where the main body of the Goorkhas was massed. There was hardly an available position in the valley, at least of importance, the range of which, from all surrounding parts, this man had not discovered and carefully noted; so that the action of his modern machine guns was apt to be exact and terrible from their opening shot.

The hours passed and the night was nearly done

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before the old man lay down to rest on a rough *charpoy* which stood in a little alcove, and he had rested but a couple of hours when he rose up again in some agitation, and turning up the lamps, began to study the patterns on the hood of the globe; he still seemed unsatisfied and distraught, though he whispered insistently from time to time, " 'Tis but a dream; only a dream!" but then fell to tugging his beard and frowning, for he was unaccustomed to such dreams.

He thought that Zebrastar, the High Priest of Pashupati, had stood by him in the room and reproached him bitterly for the course he was about to pursue. The priest had called on the gods to judge that he himself was guiltless in the matter, and had aided Mahommed only because he had been deceived regarding his motive, but that the gods themselves had made it plain to him, and sent him now to warn the Moslem that they were weary of his plotting and double-dealing, and would surely strike the cup from his lips if he dared to lift it.

From past experience with dreams Mahommed believed that this was liable to be a true expression of Zebrastar's own mental attitude. He eliminated the gods immediately, and tried to probe the *man's* meaning. Was the warning a threat? The priest had unavoidably known much, and seemed to have learned enough more to make him dangerous. Would he use his knowledge, and how? Or was the

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dream but a dream—a psychological expression of the other's mind, which he had vaguely sensed before, but which had not sufficiently impressed him. He told himself again and again, "'Twas a dream!" but the dawn found him restless and unsatisfied on the very eve of his great venture. Now, "he would cast the die boldly and stand by his stars"; and anon, "he would temporise till he could see Zebrastar." Finally, he determined to hold his hand till he saw how the stars worked that day; they clearly predicted a great victory. The Goorkhas were in strong position to meet Lalkura, counting the Moslems out. Well, if the Hillsmen could turn that position themselves this day, he would be sure of the stars, and strike boldly with them; if not, he was still uncommitted—still the friend of Nepaul.

. . . . . .

Later that eventful morning, the White Rose had her way and rode out beside her lord through an avenue of swords that clashed and rang above their heads. And the whisper quickly spread that this going forth to battle was their bridal tour, for the priests had but left them when the advance began.

By noon the dark-blue lines of Vikrama's troops were clearly seen, massed in a great curve whose convex bellied toward the hills. So far, Lalkura's advance had been covered, and, with the exception

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of some strong outposts who were holding vital points, all his strength lay in the heart of the hills behind, hid from the foe by the towering walls of the pass of Chintapari.

From the mouth of this rocky declivity open green foothills sloped gently to a final crest some two thousand yards in front of the blue-clad Goorkha troops. The space between this crest and the enemy was broken by a little reedy hollow where some mountain stream was trickling sluggishly to the Bhagmati.

Lalkura looked over the ground carefully, and at the massive lines of Goorkhas awaiting the attack. He hardly understood the position. It did not seem particularly strong, but he knew that the little men guarding it were among the world's greatest fighters, and it was somewise sorrowfully that he turned at last to his own barbaric might, which stretched away into the far hills like some great serpent, brilliant, undulating, deadly; ready at his word to fling itself down into the hell that was waiting below.

He looked away again toward the hills which held Girza-il-Kab, hoping against hope to see the standards of Mahommed, for the Moslem had more than hinted he would join the fight; but, though runners had been sent to tell him of the advance, so far there had been no sign of support.

He turned to the Princes and to Soondai, mutely

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questioning if it were their will to advance; and for answer Soondai leaned to his saddle-bow and loosed a silk flag hanging there, then, flinging up her arm, sent the Rajput Sun and Moon fluttering in the breeze.

In an instant, as the signal was seen, a hoarse roar swelled from the waiting clans, which gathered in volume and power as it swept back and was caught up far and near. A thousand banners swayed riotously in the sunlight; ten thousand swords flung out with a long-drawn viperous hiss; and as Lalkura and his lords reined back, the wild glittering host swept through.

Eight hundred horse led the way, spurring straight down the valley as though alone they would break through that somber dark-blue line. But they reined in well this side of the crest, just as an ominous wave ran through the Goorkha ranks below, and, with a defiant swirl of steel, broke hard for the eastern foothills, where they hovered on and off like hungry kites, watching the fight impatiently for the chance to swoop down and cut their way with sword and spear, in and out again.

After the horse, the foot came on—tribe after tribe, the flower of the hills, claiming Rajput blood alike with their foe. Bare to the waist and with girded loins they sprang down the slope like eager hounds set free of leash.

And then somewhere in that dark crescent a

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trumpet blared suddenly. Its echoes were still quivering in the air when, back of the Goorkhas, out of the shadow of Holy Pashupati, there came a burst of flame and smoke and a roar that reverberated thunderously from hill to hill.

A storm of shell struck the crest as the rush of the Hillsmen touched it, flinging them back with frightful slaughter. They rallied in broken masses and rushed on blindly; but the Goorkhas took up the tale with their modern Martinis and Lee-Metfords, and the wave broke back disheartened, desperate. And once again, as they touched the ridge, a trumpet sang shrilly, and again that flame and smoke belched forth from Pashupati and mowed great jagged gaps in their flying phalanxes.

Three times that awful charge was made, and thrice three hundred dead lay piled along the horrid way.

Lalkura saw it all, and looked for the Mussulman banners in vain. He was not strong enough; neither did his position make a flank attack possible. It seemed like murder to send his men again, and yet they were clamouring wildly and there was a press of young hot-bloods around him begging the honour of leading them.

Just then Soondai leaned to him and whispered, quickly pointing here and there as she did so, as if in explanation. His face lighted as he listened, and he turned quickly to his officers, speaking

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rapidly and pointing as she had done; and as they heard, they spurred away with their orders.

There was some commotion for a time, and then a shout, as a thousand naked Bhutans, armed with bows and short heavy swords, broke clear of the press and went down the slope at an easy trot, the rest of the Hillsmen deploying right and left by way of diversion.

As the Bhutans neared the ridge, they took on greater speed as if desirous of outracing the grim messengers of death. But as they ran they spread with ever-widening ranks. Then, as that trumpet rang out again, the moving brown mass halted with a jerk—stood still—fell back in riotous disorder—yes, but live men, every one!

And when the shrieking shells had buried themselves in the crest, they sprang erect again and dashed away, ever spreading as they ran for the little reedy stream. Twenty dropped before they reached it, but the fire was slack, their opponents waiting, as they had before, to fire point blank.

Once in the ditch it was a fairer game. The arrows sang as shrilly as the rifle balls, and were more effective, for the Goorkhas were unprotected, save by a trench.

Again a rush was made, of riflemen this time. Not quite so successfully, but still with enough sharpshooters landed in the ditch to make it

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decidedly uncomfortable for the little men in blue.

Then, just as a battalion was forming to clear the stream at bayonet point, there came a swift diversion from the West. Spurts of flame shot out from the thick woods, and shell after shell came hurtling into the Goorkhas' formations. There was a time of sudden confusion, which Lalkura's cavalry took immediate advantage of, sweeping down with a fury which drove them clean through the wavering right wing of the enemy, cutting and slashing and yelling like demons!

And with that, the rest was a rout! For when Mahommed's Brahnis came rushing down with their "*Deen! Deen! Mahommed! Mahommed!*" threatening to flank them, the Goorkhas broke, beaten. And Lalkura and Mahommed drove them like sheep clean to the gates of Bhatgaon, giving them never a pause to stand, the Mussulman Hill battery shelling them all the way.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

TEN days after the first defeat of Vikrama a runner came over the hills and through the Terai to Motihari with a letter from John Ryder, the Resident at Khatmandu, to McKenzie, who was an old friend of his. It contained astounding news—that Bhatgaon had fallen and Vikrama was preparing to abandon Patan and mass his whole defense about Khatmandu, the capital.

The general disaster was attributed to the unexpected demonstration of Yah Mahommed in favour of Lalkura at a critical moment of the first battle. The added weight of the Mussulman force had proved too much for the Goorkhas, who were driven from position after position during ten days of desperate fighting in which both sides had lost enormously. It was proposed to hold the Residency as an asylum for the *Ranis* in case of final disaster, and Ryder was anxious to have the moral support of a few Europeans during the crisis. He ended by inviting McKenzie, and any healthy friends he might have on hand, to come in and take a hand in the game.

The news naturally caused a sensation at the

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Station. Vague rumours of battles lost and won had reached the Planters' Club, gathered from flying pilgrims who had found the great *avatar* a warmer business than they had anticipated; but these reports had been contradictory, and no one was prepared for the news of such an overwhelming defeat of the King's troops.

McKenzie reserved Ryder's invitation for Nicholas and two other men whom he knew to be trustworthy, and they immediately agreed to go in with him. Nicholas was, of course, the more eager, as the enterprise showed some promise of elucidating the mystery of Lalkura and his friend Meredith.

So these four men made a record dash through the Terai to Bhimpedi, where an escort was waiting to take them over the famous Cisagurdi pass and into Chitlong. Here they got palanquins over the Chundragiri, at the foot of which a troop of Goorkha spear was waiting with spare saddle-horses, and the second night from home they ate supper at the British Residency, with the intermittent roar of distant artillery as a somber accompaniment.

The situation had not improved since Ryder wrote. Patan had fallen, and it was reported that Lalkura had made his headquarters in the royal palace there, while it was supposed his ally, Mahommed, was working around among the Tibetan passes for a flank move on the capital itself.

The next morning a brand new American flag,

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the property of Doctor Nicholas, snapped defiantly in the breeze alongside the British Jack, and the Resident's guests sat down to watch the game.

That night a strange scene was enacted in the apartments of Soondai, the new Hill *Rani*, who, with her lord, was occupying a wing of the old Patan palace.

Lalkura, who had been in the saddle since before dawn, was sleeping heavily, but Soondai was wandering through the rooms of the royal suite restless and distrait.

So far, she had not seen Mahommed since she left Girza-il-Kab at his command and threw in her lot with Lalkura. Neither could she tell whether the news of her hasty marriage had reached him; but she knew the time of her accounting must be drawing near, and she dreaded it.

She had withheld all knowledge of her compact with the Moslem from Lalkura, being anxious not to complicate matters before it was necessary—though she had an uneasy suspicion that her husband knew of several more things than he spoke even to her. As for Mahommed, it was not fear of his wrath which disturbed her—though she recognised that it would probably be great—as she believed his tenderness for her would hold his hand from reprisals, however great his disappointment might be.

It was the thought of this disappointment which

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troubled her; he had been very good to her all of this present life, whatever he might have been in the past. He had taught her all she knew, made her the capable woman she was, and she had come to look on him in the light of a father—which it must be confessed was not always to his taste. In return for this, she was to blast the great ambition of his life suddenly and without warning.

True, that ambition looked to her now as being malignant, intolerable, a thing of abomination; yet there had been a time, quite recently, when she had looked on it as a scientific experiment of vital interest to her benefactor—a just vengeance which was almost poetic.

One tiny ray of comfort she had: she could not be false to her compact—could not, simply because she had lost the power to be true. Her wizardries had fallen away from her like a garment when she found her heart's desire. She had felt them slipping, slipping, slipping, as in the past weeks Lalkura had gained more and more ascendency over her.

At first she had cried fearfully but loyally to Mahommed for help, but he had always set her fears aside as childish things; and later, realising what love meant for her, she had held her peace. Then came that day at Motihari when she had saved her lover's life, and having paid the full price, her eyes were opened and she knew.

She had reached the last room of the suite and

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stood at the great north window looking down into the square where a bivouac of lancers were celebrating the day's victory. She watched them awhile with interest, their enthusiasm rousing her from melancholy brooding. Then, turning, she found herself face to face with Yah Mahommed.

Even while her hand went to her heart to stay its sudden leap, a dull wonder touched her as to how he came there. The entrance to the suite was bolted and locked securely, while a double guard in the outer corridor and at the foot of the stairs barred the way, with strict orders to let none pass, for the Dada Babu was sleeping.

Yet there he stood, looking at her gravely—questioningly—while the red light from the bonfires of the merrymakers in the square played fitfully about his robes; beyond this, the room was in darkness.

"My lord, is it thou?" she said, recovering herself and advancing a little to meet him. But then she stopped with a quick chill; something about the man held her back and awed her.

"Yes, it is I, Loda; or perhaps I should address thee by thy new title, which I have but just learned. No?" in answer to her little gesture of appeal. "Well, I am glad. I was surprised thou hadst gone so far, but 'twas doubtless wise, as all thy actions are. And now, child, I am here to carry out our plan; art thou ready?"

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But the girl's tongue clung hotly in her mouth and she could not answer—could only make that little mute gesture of appeal; and Mahommed, noting it again, leaned quickly toward her with an anxious frown.

"Speak, girl, speak! What ails thee? Whence this disorder?"

"My lord," she spoke at length tremulously, "thou didst startle me, for thy coming was very sudden—even as I was thinking of thee."

"Thou wast not used to be so easily startled; but forgive the method of my coming, on the plea that it was urgent and necessarily secret. But thou wast thinking of me—of our plan?"

"Yes, my lord—of how I should break the news to thee of its impossibility of fulfilment."

"Impossibility of fulfilment!" he repeated curiously; "that means—— But there, what should it mean but more of thy childish fears——"

"No," she interrupted desperately, "not fears, but certainties! I have lost my power over this man utterly. I warned thee, my lord, when I felt it slipping from me; and now 'tis gone, and I am but as a little child."

Mahommed stood silent, motionless, gazing steadfastly at her; and she, herself again now she had spoken, faced him bravely and with a certain scorn for her former weakness. Thus they stood, the man thinking—feeling his way—the girl waiting

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for his further words; and up from the square rose the chorus of the battle-song:

> See the swords flash forth to meet him;
> See the fire leap up to greet him;
> Hail, Lalkura!—Heaven Born!

The words came ringing and tearing up from the night and seemed to sting Mahommed out of his composure. He drew near the girl and looked deep in her eyes, then questioned in a low fierce voice, "Is it *that?*"

And she answered him with barely a quiver and fronting him bravely, "Aye, my lord, it *is* that."

He drew back then and stood watching her closely. He had studied her for many years till he knew her like a second self and could sway her as he listed, but now she baffled him; there was a serenity and confidence about her uninspired by him —and equally undaunted by him—despite the momentous question between them. He finally took the line which had most easily moved her in the past, and with a sorrowful voice took up his plea.

"So, child, for an idle fancy, born of a day, thou wouldst join the ranks of those poor fools who sing so loud of what they know not! Hast figured out the awakening thou and they will have? 'Heaven born,' forsooth, when I, Mahommed, hold him dangling over hell, whose flames are ever hungry

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for just such as he. Listen to those misled fools! Yet they sing truer than they know. Aye, of a truth, 'the swords will flash forth to meet him and the flames to greet him'—when I open my hand and let him fall! What sayest thou; hast thought the matter out?"

"Aye, indeed, my lord, from every point of view; but most of all have I studied how to save thee pain."

"Let be, let be! Leave me out and thee, and answer what of him when I tear the mask away?"

"My lord, I know thy wisdom is too great to be misled by the mask; so hast thou taught me, and I care not for the mask. But truly I have also thought that thou hast been indulgent with me always, and I have reverenced thee and been as loyal as I might all my life; and that because of what lies between us so, thou wouldst be merciful. See, thou art wise, my lord, in reading the hearts of men; look into mine, and judge if there be aught betwixt thee and me."

"*Tlc! Tlc!* Thou talkest folly; thou hast been and art a fool, as all thy sex will ever be, counting idle wind-blown fancies of greater import than all the laws of gods and men. See, I look in thy heart then, and because of what I see there I tell thee I will have no mercy. Lo, I have been father and mother, sister, brother and all thy kin, yet for what lies in thy heart thou dost forsake me in an hour,

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and that in my hour of need! No! I do not condemn thee for thy broken faith, but for that other thing."

"My lord! My lord! What can I say—what can I do?"

"What canst thou say? What do? Nay, the issue is very straight. Give up this folly, and thy wisdom will return and all may yet be saved. See, this man can never carry out his plan; he has not force enough to hold the body he has stolen, and by and by the rightful owner will gather power and sweep him out, and where wilt thou be then."

"I understand, my lord, and I have faced this, too; but surely, going out is no such fearsome thing."

"Speak of it when thou knowest it as well as I do—when thou hast learned to remember the bitterness of it, aye, and the futility! But why shouldst thou go? Thou lovest this man—he is handsome, young and tender. It is good; but what difference whether he be at heart a Hindu or a Moslem? Whether the spirit be Lalkura or Mahommed? The body will not fail thee of joys, and Mahommed's knowledge will hold thee those joys secure——"

"My lord! My lord!" she broke in piteously; "have a little mercy; surely thou dost not think me so unworthy a thing, else wouldst thou have hated me long since."

"Well, so be it. To-night I give thee thy choice

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between peace and a sword. There must be some wisdom left in thee; may it guide thee in the choosing. But waste not thy time in idle hopes of my relenting. Choose once, for all time and beyond, whom thou wilt follow; then pray thy gods to strengthen his arm to keep thee. Nay, speak not now, but wait and think. Then on the morrow, when thou goest forth, one of my captains will ask a white rose for the turban of Mahommed. If Mahommed wears it in battle that day all will be well; he will wait patiently the return of thy wisdom and power. Thou seest I trust thine honour still, child, and thy wisdom somewhat. Fare thee wisely."

She had sunk on a divan with her head in her arms before he finished, but at his last words, which had something of the old tender ring she remembered and loved, she looked up quickly—but he was gone. Then she fell to shivering again. He had come like that once before on an important occasion in her life and disappeared in the same way. Who could fight against a man like that? A great despondency fell on her as she realised 'twas the very spirit of the man that had spoken, and that he would keep his word to the very letter.

She lay on the divan fighting with her agony and fear. What should she do? What should she do? And the blackness that lay in the room—for the fires and the shouting had died down—lay on

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her heart also, together with a cold despair. All the boldness of her stand had broken down, because all her hope had died.

Then a thought struck her, crept into her numbed brain, rested awhile, grew strong, and brought her sighing and her tears to an end. She sat up quickly; then set to pacing the room. Why not play the man's own game till her lover was strong enough to hold his own? A white rose for his turban would hold his hand. Why not? Why not?

She did not attempt to evade the issue in any way; 'twould be an open act of dishonour, such an one as Mahommed had judged her incapable of taking. On the other hand, it would possibly save her lord from destruction, at any rate prevent his being exposed to unknown treachery; and what was honour compared to that? She had not even said she would accept or reject the method of answer; why should her silence be taken as acquiescence? All was fair in love and war. Here were both, and an opponent who did not scruple to use any means which fitted to his hand; why should she? Why should she?

Then when she was well-nigh worn out, the clouds rolled away and she saw the matter in a truer light. All her faith and hope lay in her new life, in her love! She had declared it was enough—that nothing else mattered; yet here she was contemplating its dishonour because she feared to trust it further than

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she could see. And following, another thought came. She was the White Rose, and for two hundred years had been the symbol of the house of her lord. During all that time the White Rose had been guarded from stain or smirch by these rough Hill Rajahs, any one of whom would have died for the flower or the woman's fame; now was she herself to be the one to dishonour it and them?

And then she fell asleep, and when Lalkura found her all the tribulation had passed from her eyes. But she spoke one word in his ear as they rode out together: "My lord, I would not trust the Moslem overmuch this day."

And he answered quietly: "Have no fear, Soondai; his path and ours is set about and hedged. Let us go gaily where we must, and see to it only that our hands and hearts are clean."

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" . . . and when Lalkura found her all the tribulation had passed from her eyes."

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CHAPTER XXIX

At the city gates there was a halt as the Prince's staff passed through, and a young slave pressed forward with a great basket of white roses for the Rani. She took them one by one, touched them to her lips, and passed them to the men of her house as had been her custom each day since the fight began. While she was thus engaged, a little troop of Moslem horse came spurring up and reined in at the salute, while their leader sprang to the ground and made his way to the Rani's saddle.

With a deep obeisance, he proffered his request: "A rose, a white rose, gracious lady, for the turban of my master, that thy favour may sustain him during the heat and turmoil of the day."

Soondai paused a fraction of time and cast a glance around at her nobles, who, while all a little jealous of Mahommed's prowess, were plainly pleased by his desire to wear the Hindu rose. Then she spoke:

"My lord, it grieves me to risk wounding thy master with even seeming churlishness when his friendship is so pleasant to us, aside from his right

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good help in battle, but a white rose I may not send or give save to the men of mine own house, whose honour it is and who have guarded it loyally these two hundred years. I pray thee, my lord, of thy courtesy carry this message to our lord Mahommed in the very spirit I have spoken, and with it this red rose as a sign of our love and loyal friendship."

She touched the rose, which had been lying hid in the bottom of the basket, to her lips as she had the others, and handed it to the Moslem amid the ringing shouts of the nobles, who were quick to appreciate this mark of her sensibility and affection.

The Moslem took it with a grave and somewhat dour look, bowed, and turned away; then, ere he mounted his horse, he spoke to the circle of Hillsmen: "My lords, congratulations on the colour of thy roses; thy gods be with thee, gentlemen, and keep them white; though should they be stained red this day, remember so also is that of my master, the lord Mahommed."

There was some muttering and questioning as he rode away, for the speech had puzzled most of them, and Lalkura, looking at Soondai, saw her cheek had paled. He leaned from his saddle and raised her fingers to his lips before them all, and whispered, "I thank thee, my queen; 'twas well and bravely done."

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She looked in his eyes and asked quickly, "Didst thou understand?"

"Aye," he answered, "I understood." Then a moment later, with a yearning which was half a question, "Love will suffice?"

"Aye, my lord, surely," she whispered back, "here and beyond."

. . . . . .

From the very beginning of that day's fighting the Goorkha troops were strangely confident and aggressive, considering the crushing defeats of the last ten days. Massed in strong positions on the outskirts of Khatmandu, they more than held their own, flinging back the Hillsmen's rushes in their old-time gallant style.

Lalkura and the White Rose were everywhere, cheering their people on, but again and again the cry went up for their Moslem allies. Where was Mahommed? Where was Mahommed? questioned the leaders as they came bloody and weary from charge after charge, and no one could answer.

They had undertaken the bloodiest tactics of war, a frontal attack without guns against troops with them, on the understanding that the Moslems would support them by a flank attack on the capital. This their allies had for some unknown reason failed to do. Still, recollecting the lateness of Mahommed's attack on the first day of the fight, they kept at the work bravely, each moment expect-

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ing to hear the roar of Mahommed's guns going into action.

Two only gave up hope—Lalkura and Soondai—and they seemed by far the most hopeful, plunging into the thick of the fight with songs on their lips, and an absolutely fearless mien that time and again saved the battle from degenerating into an ignominious rout.

A group of farm buildings on the edge of a tract of sal trees had proved from the first a desperate stumbling-block to the advance of the Hillsmen, whose dead were piled breast high among the rocky approaches. Seeing its great importance, Lalkura chose his men, the men of his house—clean-bred gentlemen of fighting blood—and prepared for a final assault.

He first sent five thousand foot to the attack; then when these had engaged the defense he made a wide detour for a flank movement. But just as the edge of the woods was reached there broke out such a storm of shot and shell, such a roaring and a belching forth of flame and smoke, as shut them in from friend and foe, and crushed their ranks, tore jagged holes, then filled them quick with ghastly dead. And out on the battered wreck of what was once a noble troop the Moslems sprang, with Mahommed's name upon their tongue.

The belching guns went clanking by to other bloody work, leaving the finish of the little band

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to the swords and guns of a horde of Brahnis who cared not whom they fought so there was fight and blood enough.

The Hillsmen, gallant soldiers every one, when their eyes were cleared of blood and flame, looked round for Soondai and their lord. She was unhurt, but Lalkura was all ghastly and leaning heavily on his queen in the press.

Then the men of his house rallied round them with a ring of flashing, biting steel, and strove to cut a passage out; but following the Brahnis came a dozen Pariah clans, whom Mahommed had armed and loosed to do his will, and these clamoured on the outskirts of the fighting men and blocked the way. And one by one the Rajahs fell or were torn from horse; then fought afoot; and then down in the bloody mire; and then lay still—their white roses stained indeed.

It seemed a dreadful, hopeless thing, with that fair girl and her wounded lord, the Hope of the Hills, shut in that bloody trap, while just beyond some forty thousand lusty men, who'd each have gladly dropped to hell for them, were charging here and charging there, futilely shaking the plain with furious onslaughts, any one of which, rightly sent, would have saved the Dada Babu in his hour of need.

At this juncture, when the main force of Hillsmen was falling back, savage and sullen, before the combined attack of their late allies and the Goorkhas,

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a new cry came into the fight and rang out lustily between the bugles and the cannons' roar. "A-Bohe! A-Bohe! A-Bohe!"

None of the combatants seemed to heed it—it's more than doubtful if they heard it—though it clung for a while to the edge of the fight, challenging persistently. And then the sinking sun flashed on the bright lances and orange pennons as the strange troop made a sudden sweep aside from the heart of the battle and spurred away to the west where a Hillsmen's banner set with a white rose was swaying and faltering in the haze.

"A-Bohe! A-Bohe!" They came down like a mighty rushing wind and swept into and through the Brahni horde, then back and forth, with lance and tulwar piling up their dead joyfully and with much zeal. And then Birkhana called them off; he had cut his way to Soondai and had lifted Lalkura to his own horse. Without more ado, this new force, which had slipped into the fight so opportunely, slipped out again, and, under the guidance of the Hillsmen who were left, made straight for Bhaitypore, for neither Patan nor Bhatgaon were safe now that the Moslem had turned the front of the battle.

It was a sorrowful ride. Lalkura grew fevered and was unable to sit his horse, so a palanquin was improvised which some dismounted troopers carried between them. One of the troop, being something

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of a leech, dressed the wound in a fairly skilful manner. It was a bad gash from the ragged piece of a shell, which had torn away the chest-muscles severely, and the loss of blood had been so great before help arrived that the man was now in the weakest possible state for such a rough journey home; yet it was undoubtedly the only place where he would be reasonably safe, in case Vikrama and Mahommed pushed their success, which it was highly probable they would.

So they came home to Bhaitypore and laid the wounded Prince on his bed near the open window above the rose garden. And by day and by night the passes were blocked with fugitive Hillsmen, and hourly the news that came grew more disastrous; Patan was retaken, then Bhatgaon; while many of the leaders of the Hillsmen's cause were prisoners, and the bravest and noblest lay in stark heaps on the edge of the grove where Mahommed's bloody trap was set.

So high hopes were shattered and brave endeavours swallowed up in black despair. Victory had been so near, disaster so unexpected and complete, that there was no rallying from it. The flying clans passed Bhaitypore in silence and with averted eyes; the long-looked-for *avatar* had failed and was discredited.

They and their princes had done all men could; but the gods were jealous and had turned the

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wisdom of the stars or of their prophets into foolishness; had smitten the people suddenly and sore, and there was no redress.

In all the hills the smell of burning flesh, of sacrifice, rose in the air, and the people filled the temples with rice and *dhall*, *jaggery* and *ghee*, with fruit and flowers and young kids from the flocks, and humbled themselves before the gods lest worse should follow.

But one thing they did before they repented. They halted in their flight while the Moslems were still in the valley and attacked Mahommed's stronghold, Girza-il-Kab, with an overwhelming force. The guard was unprepared and was butchered to a man. During the looting which followed, a store of powder was discovered, and by dawn the old fortress lay a piled-up smoking ruin.

Meantime Birkhana, seeing the hopelessness of the cause and the uselessness of his gallant lancers up in those rocky defiles, bid Soondai farewell with a heavy heart, and struck out for the northern passes by which he had entered the valley.

After he left, Soondai fell on a helpless mood. She tended her lord night and day with loving care and skill; but aside from her ministration, she was waiting, waiting, waiting. She knew not why nor for what; did not try to reason, she was far too weary; but she was dully conscious that the end was not yet.

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A strong guard was set about the place, but in the house itself, save her women, there was but Israel Ben Alif, who, though in the thick of the hottest fights, had escaped scatheless, and Abdulla Millik, who was in such a state of collapse as rendered him well-nigh useless.

Lalkura's wound was progressing favourably, but the fever held its grip on him strongly, and poor Soondai was hard put to it for a brave front, as he lay there like one dead. She would kneel beside him in the long nights and whisper out her love, trying to lure back her lover; and time and again she would see him struggling to come and sometimes he would speak a word or two, then drift back again.

She thought he came to her one night when she had fallen asleep in a chair at his bedside, and took her in his arms, caressing her with all his wonted tenderness. And when she had reproached him for staying away so long, he whispered that he had been preparing a place for her, and that he was not quite ready even yet, but that he would come soon now, and then they would never part again. When she woke he was sleeping heavily, still flushed with fever, but the girl had regained the poise she had lost, and from then on she waited patiently.

The evening of the fifth day after Birkhana had left, a storm swept up the valley and broke over the hills furiously. The Rani sat in the window-casement of the sick-room, watching the havoc the

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winds and the water were making in the garden below. The rose-vines were torn and flung aside ruthlessly; great trees came crashing through the gathering gloom, and the night closed in blackly with the roar of the storm and the rush of waters raging above and below.

As the night drew on, the wild piper sang shriller and shriller without on the hillside, and the rattle and crash of the thunder shook the great house from turret to keep. Strangely enough, Lalkura fell into a quieter state as the storm increased, and instead of being disturbed by it lay sleeping tranquilly.

Soondai dismissed her women, lowered the lights, and later fell into an uneasy sleep herself by the side of her patient's couch; and by midnight, despite the furious gale, in all that great house Abdulla Millik was the only one awake.

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CHAPTER XXX

ABDULLA MILLIK, lying in the dark beside his fellow servant, Ben Alif, in the antechamber from their lord's sleeping-room, listened to the moans and shrieks of the wind, and thought of many things he might better have let alone. What with the trumpet-like snores of the dwarf and the rattle and crash of the thunder, his rest was much disturbed; and he whispered curses at them both in the stilted periods of his kind. Truth was, Abdulla was again between the horns of a dilemma. The cause of the "Mark" had failed, and it seemed only reasonable to him that its foes would not be content with anything less than a drastic vengeance, which would certainly include Abdulla Millik if he were caught in the household of the Dada Babu. He would have fled on the first news of disaster had he not feared that he would fare worse outside than in. Later, Birkhana had brought news that Doctor Nicholas and McKenzie were at the Residency, and Abdulla had pondered long and deeply as to how he might use this information. If he could only get to the Doctor Sahib, Nicholas would protect him and guarantee that he

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was no *bhudmash* rebel. Still, for all his pondering, Abdulla had stayed at Bhaitypore and Nicholas at Khatmandu. One plan he had in case of desperate necessity. This was no less than flight by the secret way, upon whose entrance he and the dwarf had been employed. He had familiarised himself with the working of the great stone door until he could, alone and in the dark, revolve it silently. Inside, at the foot of the rough-hewn steps which led up to the doorway, he had secreted food and drink, matches and a lamp; but when all is said, it must be acknowledged that he dreaded that dark way but little less than he did the emissaries of Vikrama's vengeance.

So he lay shivering in the dark, now planning, and anon cursing his luck. Then, during a short lull in the gale a new sound was borne in on him which brought him up on his haunches in a panic. He listened intently, but the gale had swept the sound away again. A minute passed—another—and then it came again, seemingly riding on the wind right up to the outer room casement; the clash of arms, shouts and screaming curses, and once more the sound which first had startled him—the sharp rattle of rifles!

What was it? What did it mean? He sat gnawing his fingers and glaring out into the dark, waiting and listening to hear the sound again, as if the once were not enough. And then breaking

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harshly through the noise of wind and water came the clanging crash of the alarm-bell down below!

Soondai flung aside the *purdah* between the rooms even as Ben Alif lurched heavily to his feet, and the two ran swiftly through this room to the one beyond which let out onto a great buttress.

They both craned out into this windy passage, built of old for archers, but the roar and hiss of the storm shut out all else save the clanging bell-note that rose and fell, now with a jarring crash and again faint, thin, and barely discernible.

Ben Alif put his lips to the girl's ear and whispered, but she cried: "No, no; Lord Lalkura warned me, in case of this, to wait till the outer door was down. See to it, Ben Alif; all now depends on the skill with which thou hast strengthened the other two. Is thy fuse ready?"

"Aye, Thakurani; 'tis there. I laid the train fresh again this night so we can fire it before we open the door. Allah! but that will surprise them if there be any of the Sons of Sheitan there! . . . Ah-h-h! What is that?"

There was a crash and a cry from the room they had left; then a hoarse shout as Ben Alif, recovering from his astonishment, sprang forward, followed by Soondai, whose face was white and drawn with dread.

Abdulla Millik had never heard of the old tragedy of the passage, and never dreamed that the foe could

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come that way and lie in wait for who opened the door; neither knew he aught of Ben Alif's plan for insuring a clear passage should they need to open it. So when Soondai and her man ran through, the *khansamah* determined that his time had come to hide at least if not to fly; and without further debate he ran to the wainscoting, fumbled till he grasped the handle, then began to twist till the stone rolled round.

He stepped forward hurriedly to the opening and tripped over a rug which the rotation of the stone had displaced. As he fell he shrieked, for a lantern flashed from the dark passage and a man sprang through the opening, thrusting at his falling body with a naked sword; then, without following up the blow, passed quickly to the Prince's chamber. More frightened than hurt, Abdulla rolled howling on the floor, as the first intruder was followed by another and yet another.

At this juncture Ben Alif ran in, gripping a heavy stool which he had seized as he ran. Two men were in the room and a third was squeezing through the narrow way, for the stone had but half revolved. Soondai, who was quick at his heels, saw him hurl the stool, catching the nearest man in the middle and driving him breathless to the wall. He ran in then barehanded, and seeing this, Soondai mounted a *charpoy* and, reaching for a panel of arms, tore it from the wall; then catching up the

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first weapon she touched, a short spiked battle-ax, she watched her chance as the dwarf sprang back from a savage lunge of the second man's knife, and thrust the handle in his hand, then turned to the wainscoting and strove to shut the door. Her efforts were vain, for a fourth man was pressing through and holding the way for others. Seeing the futility of her attempt, she ran back, and, seizing a heavy *kookerie*, was turning to aid Ben Alif when there came a sound from the bed-chamber beyond that made her heart stand still.

'Twas Mahommed himself who had thrust at Abdulla; then, neither caring whether his sword had gone home or no, he passed quickly to the room beyond, where Lalkura lay. He halted in the middle of the chamber, expecting to see Soondai, then fixed his eyes balefully on the sleeping Hindu.

As the sound of the fight broke harshly through the *purdahs*, he spoke loud and scornfully: "Awake! Awake, Heaven Born! Awake, I say! Yah Mahommed greets thee!"

His voice had barely died away when Lalkura started up and leaped to the floor, suddenly quick at the voice of his mortal foe. He caught his sword from its place at the head of the couch and flashed it from the scabbard as he answered the Moslem's greeting: "Hail, Mahommed—traitor!—renegade! Son of Hell, I give thee welcome!"

They closed furiously, then broke anon and

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played more skilfully; but the bandages had slipped down from Lalkura's chest and the wound was broken in the struggle so that the blood poured out freely; and seeing this, Mahommed pressed him the harder, driving him toward the bed. Lalkura's strength ebbing fast, he stumbled and his guard went down, but he cried aloud, "Soondai! Soondai!" even as Mahommed's sword came whistling at his head. He saw it coming and fell sideways from it, thus missing the full force of the blow, which struck him slantwise across the crown, a frightful blow, that would have clove him to the chin had he caught it fairly. He fell, then rose to his knees blindly, even as Soondai leaped at Mahommed, screaming like a wildcat and swinging the *kookerie* as she came.

The Moslem was surprised and caught off his guard, and the knife gashed his shoulder before he could throw off the blow. She flung on him again, and then with a fierce oath he lunged straight at her and she fell away with a little shuddering cry.

Before Mahommed's sword was free of the terrible stroke Soondai was avenged; for Lalkura, though stunned and shaking with weakness, staggered to his feet, and at sight of Soondai there his strength came back; and, as the Moslem sprang away from the Rani, the Prince rushed in. But alas! his stroke came just too late to save her, though Mahommed fell by her side an instant later.

Lalkura stood looking down on them a moment,

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then dropped his sword with a clang, raised his arms, and whispered, "Soondai; Soondai, beloved, I am coming—I am coming——"

And then, with a convulsive shudder, he brought his hands to his head and gasped: "My God! My God, what—where am I? Oh, where—— Help!" He stumbled toward the bed, but missed it and fell to the floor heavily, and there lay still.

The sounds of the fight in the outer room persisted long after the tragedy in the Prince's chamber was ended, and Ben Alif was so occupied that he had heard neither the beginning nor the end of that other fight. Twice had he cleared the room and twice failed to close the door; and then, in desperation he seized the lamp which Soondai had carried into the room and struggled through the opening himself, striking so furiously as he made his way that those on the top steps gave back before him, leaving the door clear. He set his shoulders for an effort even as they thrust up at him from the steps below. Slowly the great stone rolled back, inch by inch, till it clicked fast, and Ben Alif was alone with his fate.

He stumbled like a drunkard, swaying back and forth on the topmost step, swinging his lantern and striking out wildly with his ax. The blood was pouring from his wounds. Then he felt his strength going, knew his fight was done, and finished his sacrifice while he might. He flung

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his ax down among the cursing rout, dropped to his knees, and had the lamp open before the rush came up at him. They thrust him through and through in the dark, while his hand with the candle from the lamp was groping in a hole at the side of the steps—the hole which led the powder train from the room beyond.

He was dead when the explosion came—no, not dead, but away with Soondai and her lord.

And his spirit was well attended on its way; for a score of men went out with him in the passage, and five he had sent before to herald his coming. So went, honourably, Ben Israel Ben Alif, the Wolf of the Brahnis; and for him also love did suffice.

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CHAPTER XXXI

When the noise of the exploding mine had died away and the muffled shrieks and curses of the dying, Abdulla Millik crawled cautiously from his hiding-place in the shadows of the tapestry and stood listening breathlessly. He had grasped the situation in the passage instantly when he heard the explosion, and judged that if the way was not closed up it certainly would be free of the enemy at least. It was quite dark where he stood, and in the lulls of the storm he could hear the crash of axes on the great outer door. Still he did not hurry; he knew there were two other doors between the outer hall and this, and that Ben Alif had strengthened them with strong iron girders, so 'twould be no easy matter to force them.

He wondered where his mistress was, and if she had missed him from the fight, and if she had not heard the sound of the explosion even above the storm. Then it came to him with a shock that the man who had entered first and frightened him so badly had passed to the room beyond. He listened intently, but there was nothing save the dismal roar

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of the wind and water and the echo of the axes. And then he crept slowly toward the farther room.

He stood aghast on the threshold at the sight which met his eyes: Soondai, his master, and—surely, yes, he knew that great white-bearded head which glared and grinned so horribly; 'twas he whom the soldiers called Just Lord, Yah Mahommed—and they were all dead! dead! dead!

He fell a-shivering and gripped the *purdah* for support; then braced himself and caught a lamp and lifted up a bloody sword, and was turned about to go and risk the secret way, when a low groan startled him so that he dropped the sword with a clatter. Gaining courage somewhat, he looked around. 'Twas clearly not Mahommed, for his head was severed clean! And the Rani? Nay, as clearly 'twas not she! He crossed over to the bed and kneeled beside the Prince, then started up—*he* was not dead!

Abdulla stood staring stupidly at his master, and his only thought at first was one of anger that he should thus complicate matters by being alive. He would have left him anyway, but on a sudden it seemed to him that little Yussuf was watching him with tearful eyes, and he could not do it. He groaned and cursed, and vowed he was a fool, but he set the lamp down and with the bed linen improvised a rough sling, then laboriously dragged the Prince to the antechamber.

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He freed the spring with many misgivings and let the stone revolve a few scant inches. The smoke rolling out reassured him, and he opened it to its full extent, and later thrust his lamp in, and then entered himself. The steps were torn raggedly, and some loosened rocks were lying in the way; to the rest he shut his eyes determinedly.

As he regained the room he heard them battering in the second door and knew it was time he was gone. He lifted his master through and lowered him down the broken steps, then ran back again for the sword he had dropped. When he came to close the door his resolution almost failed him, but the sounds were growing close, and harsh commands and curses rang above the storm, so he forced it to, praying to Allah that all were dead who knew its secret save himself.

And thus Rama Lalkura, the Dada Babu, disappeared from Bhaitypore, mysteriously, even as he had come. And there be those in the hills to-day who declare that this was a true *avatar*, and again others who shake their heads and say that the gods repudiated it. Be this as it may, the hills are still unconquered, and the White Rose is still the emblem of Bhaitypore.

Two days after the fall of Lalkura's house at Bhaitypore, a Mussulman came crying into the camp of a Goorkha outpost, demanding aid and a safe conduct for himself and his master, an English

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doctor, who, according to his story, had been a close friend of Yah Mahommed, the dead Moslem leader. The fellow stated that his master had been badly wounded during the night attack on Lalkura and had become unconscious, while he, the servant, was trying to get him to the British Residency, where friends would identify and care for him.

An escort brought in the wounded man, who was lying in a little hill cave, and the pair, master and servant, were conducted down to Khatmandu, where the Resident was immediately communicated with. He interviewed the servant and then sent hurriedly for Nicholas and McKenzie. They identified the strangers as Allan Meredith and his man, Abdulla Millik. Permission was readily given, after a few formalities, to remove the sick man to the Residency quarters, where he would be under the immediate care of his friends.

In the short official inquiry preceding the Doctor's removal, Nicholas was able to corroborate Abdulla's story that his master had not only been a friend of the late Moslem leader, but a guest at Girza-il-Kab at the time hostilities commenced. Abdulla stated in addition to this that his Sahib had remained out of curiosity at the fortress till it was raided, and then had barely escaped to Mahommed's camp, where he found his friend had changed front and stood for Vikrama instead of Lalkura. The Doctor Sahib, who was incensed at the attack on the house

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where he had been a guest, insisted on going with Mahommed on the disastrous night attack to Bhaitypore, with the result which was now seen.

It was a well-planned story and successfully told, especially the part regarding the sack of Girza-il-Kab, which was cleverly brought in to emphasise the fact that Meredith had been a non-combatant while Mahommed was fighting for Lalkura.

Nicholas watched Abdulla closely through his heavy spectacles while the latter went loquaciously into picturesque detail, and when the story was finished as artistically as it was begun, and to the satisfaction of the inquiring officers, he took the man aside and spoke to him with much feeling.

"Abdulla Millik, I believe that thou art about the smoothest rascal and the most stupendous liar in India to-day; but for the part thou hast played in this matter, I am, as long as I live, thy friend, and I will aid and comfort thee continually. Meantime, 'twere better for thee to take a vacation till thy master recovers, lest thou remind him of things it be wiser for him to forget; for men with broken heads dream foolishly, Abdulla—dost thou understand?"

"Aye, Sahib, I understand."

"Then we will get thee a *perwan* out of this place, and with the money I shall presently give thee thou wilt go to Bombay and take up thy quarters

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in the Sahib's Malabar Hill house and wait there till we come. Then, if necessary, I will talk with thee again; but meantime, as thou dost wish thy old age to be long and pleasant, keep thy mouth tight shut."

So Allan Meredith was moved to the British Residency and two doctors watched him night and day till he came back to life again, doubtfully and with much pain. He pressed Nicholas's hand feebly when he first recognised him, and later asked for Stubbs, but questioned neither his condition nor surroundings.

When he was well enough to be moved, a most luxurious *dak* was laid by Vikrama, who had daily sent offerings of fruit and flowers for the sick Sahib; and a guard of honour went with them over the passes to the very gates of the Planters' Club at Motihari.

. . . . . .

A month later Nicholas and Allan were sitting out on the veranda of the Malabar Hill bungalow. Abdulla had just served after-dinner coffee, and the two men were smoking, while Stubbs, who had entirely recovered from his former peculiar distemper, sat on his haunches as close to Meredith as he could possibly get.

Nicholas watched his friend affectionately through the tobacco smoke. He was fairly satisfied with his progress toward health; both chest and scalp wounds had healed cleanly, and every day the man

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was coming back more and more to his former self, the only drawback being occasional fits of despondency which, after all, were but to be expected from the convalescent state.

Meredith had been looking over some of the sheets of his book, reading passages aloud to Nicholas; but as he read a petulant note grew in his voice, and by and by he dropped the sheets with a sigh and fell to pulling Stubbs's ears moodily.

"What is it, Allan?" asked Nicholas with quick sympathy.

"Oh, nothing; but since I've been sick that stuff reads like awful rot; everything seems changed somehow, and I can't get my bearings. I must have been dreaming like the devil, Billy, only I've forgotten it all except where you've helped me out. Gad! What an ass I must have been, poking my head into that silly fight."

"Oh, pshaw, what's the good of worrying about that? You had a relapse of the Bombay trouble, and you might as well blame me for not seeing it coming on and stopping you. But, there, you're all right now and doing finely. As for dreams, why wouldn't you dream, with those two cracks on the head, to say nothing of that chest affair! The wonder to me is that you ever woke up, and you've certainly no cause to be blue."

What Nicholas truly thought of those dreams no living soul ever knew; but by his consistent

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attitude and patient care he did much to loosen their hold on his friend's mentality.

Later Allan returned to England, fully recovered mentally and physically, but his expected work on the action of specific nerve-ganglia under special conditions was never published.

THE END

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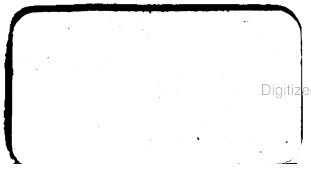

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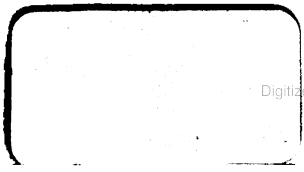

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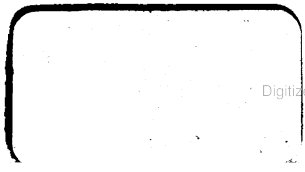

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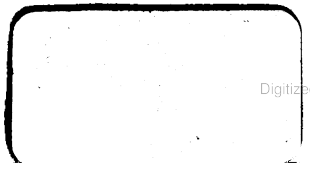

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